NEON GENESIS EVANGELION ANIMA

5

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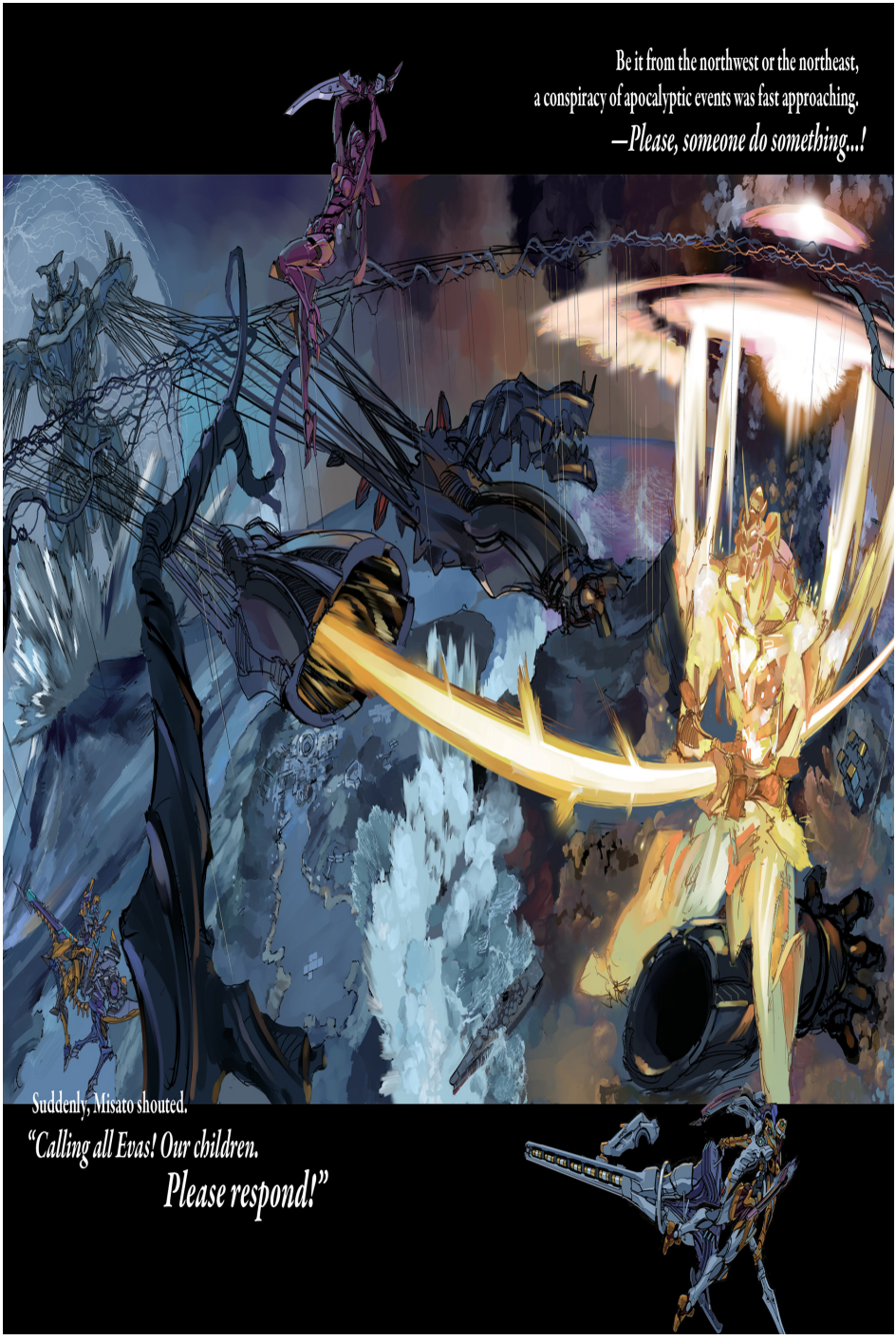
EVANGELION ANIMA 5

"You look like a damn hero, Shinji..."
EVANGELION
FINAL MODEL
An Eva running on 0.82 seconds of the Third Impact's Peak Power.
FOUR MOVING PYLONS
Black Sphere/Time Brake
wrapped in reverberating field.

YOMOTSU HIRASAKA ISLAND

SHINJI'S SPEAR / LANCE OF LUCRETIUS


Be it from the northwest or the northeast,
a conspiracy of apocalyptic events was fast approaching.
—Please, someone do something...!
Suddenly, Misato shouted.
"Calling all Evas! Our children.
Please respond!"

ORICHALCUM
WEAVE PLUGSUIT
Eva-02 sighted on Yomotsu Hirasaka Island.
02

NEON GENESIS EVANGELION

ANIMA

VOLUME 5

BY
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CONCEPT
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Seven Seas Entertainment

EVANGELION ANIMA VOL. 5

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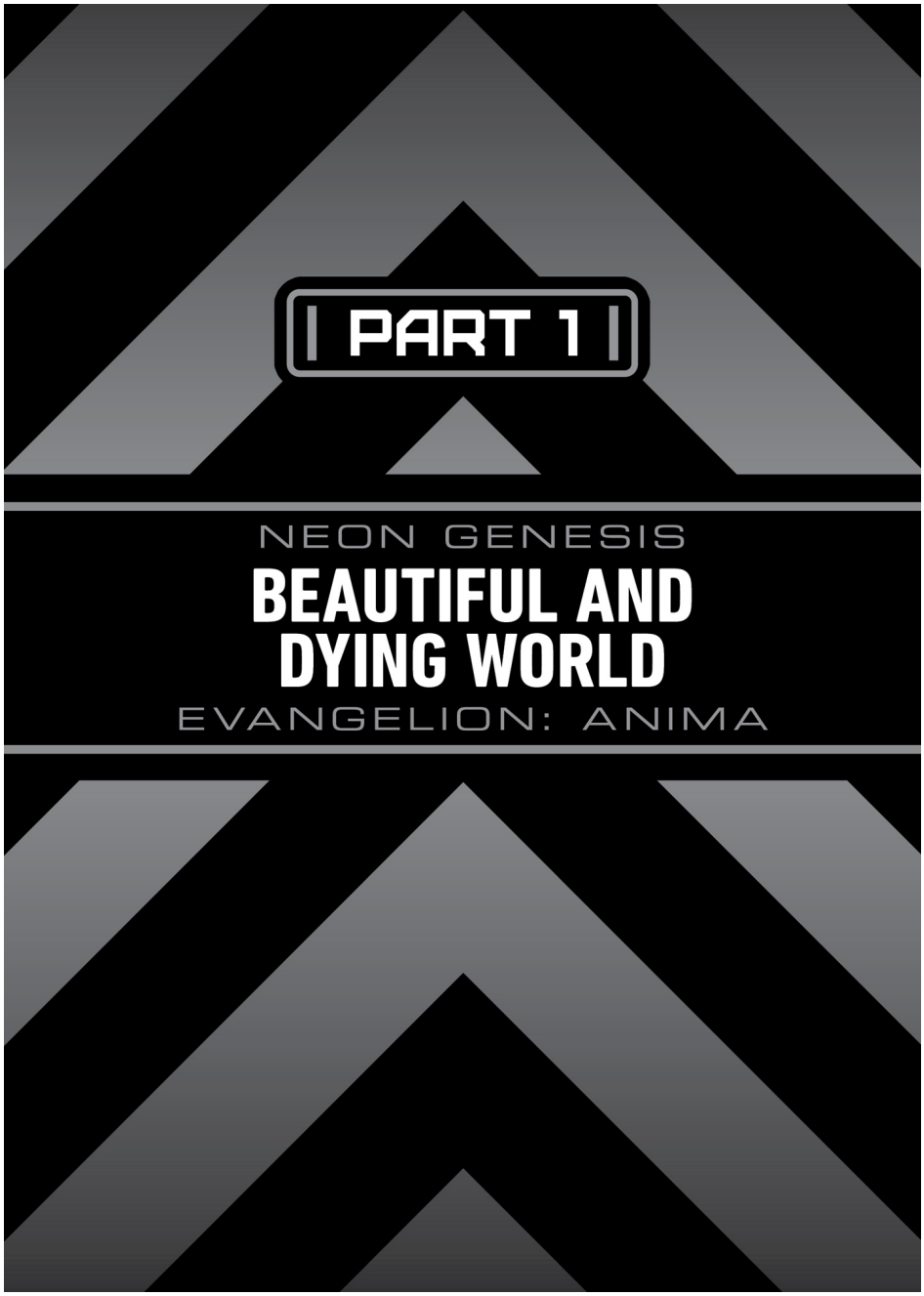

PART 1
NEON GENESIS
BEAUTIFUL AND
DYING WORLD
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 1:
Final Regeneration

THRUM!

The giant pulse echoed throughout the underground complex.

DA-THRUM!

Would Super Eva finally make its reappearance?

The crawling giant lurched one of its arms upward, as if trying to grab hold of something. The thin layer of ice covering it slowly broke away as smoke rose from its body. The giant was acting strangely. It trembled, as if it didn't have full control. Heat shot out of its body as it tried to reposition itself.

"It's lost its balance. It doesn't need to accelerate as much as it did," Maya whispered.

The ruins of Central Dogma. The underground lab complex and former headquarters of Nerv. Lilith's Chronostatic Sphere, its defining feature, had been stolen away, leaving an imprint in the place where it had been. Maya had hurried to the deserted area on a hunch. She was grinning now, though she didn't know it.

"But… Look at you. Such an old model."

The giant that looked like Super Eva turned again, shaking off the ice, which highlighted the yellow accents of the old Eva-01. It broke through the experimental aquarium, boiling away what little water was left. Steam rose from the giant's super-heated body.

"Heh… Ha ha… Ah ha ha ha ha!"

Maya, the grim chief of science and engineering, exploded with laughter. The giant continued reaching for the invisible sky from within the smoke and rubble, as if to say, "I should be flying by now."

The entry plug shook violently. Asuka held on to the headrest of Shinji's plug seat. She looked up through the center hatch at the classroom ceiling, gasping when it suddenly closed. The entry plug

shook from all sides now.

We're accelerating through 3D space…and it feels like we're inside something much larger.

She heard the unmistakable contractions of a giant's muscle fibers.

"No! We're inside an Eva?!"

THRUM!

Shock waves reverberated through her body, originating from in front of her.

"And a pulse… It's Super Eva's heart!"

I can't believe it! We actually brought Super Eva back!

Asuka was shocked that her prayer had come true. She knew Shinji would concentrate on his Eva once he was seated in the plug. And she would've considered the experiment a great success even if Shinji had only traced Super Eva's signal from Yomotsu Hirasaka beyond the Bonin Islands, also known as the Ogasawara Islands. She had not been expecting this kind of magic to occur.

"Hah!" Asuka giggled. "Good job getting your better half back, Shinji!"

She looked around, but she couldn't tell where they were because of the distortions in the virtual display.

His vision is getting narrower…

"Asuka," Shinji croaked. She looked over and saw that he was turning pale as he struggled to shift the heavy control stick. His breathing had grown shallow.

It's tunnel vision. He's panicking.

"There's something wrong… I can't…breathe…"

Shinji clawed at his throat with his left hand. He unbuttoned his collar, tearing off the first button of his shirt in the process.

"Father and Ritsuko-san… They're here… The only things left in this body… Painful… All of it!"

"Stop talking nonsense and get up!"

According to Toji and the others, this Shinji was a representation of himself in the dream. Asuka had placed her bets on the classroom being a secure location that Shinji had dreamed up, but things weren't

as safe as they seemed.

"Get a hold of yourself!" Asuka shouted.

Shinji was suffocating. Asuka tried to bring him back into reality through his projection.

"I have to get out of here. But I can't fly…and that's the only way out!"

The plug rumbled as the Eva collapsed to the floor. Asuka yelped, her back slamming against the wall. She caught the interior of the entry plug just as her face was about to smack into it.

"Pull yourself together!" she growled,

"I can't fly," Shinji said. "Where are my wings?! Did you take them away, Father?!"

He'd lost control of himself. Asuka groped around in the entry plug, raised her hand, and brought it down on Shinji's face. "Calm down, you idiot!" Several pop-up windows appeared on the screen, informing her that the Eva was now in combat mode.

"An enemy…" Shinji muttered.

A chill ran down Asuka's spine. *Is he confusing his pain with the Eva's?*

Shinji and Super Eva shared the same heart, and the line was blurred between their two entities. But if the dream theory was correct, then the Eva was currently his only remaining body.

Did the Eva feel that sensation just now? Is Shinji's dream nothing more than a dream?!

"Enemies… Aaah!" Shinji frantically tried piloting his Eva. "Weapons… I'm defenseless! I can't fly… I can't even move!"

The Eva was kneeling, but it slipped as it kicked the ground, having yet to recover its balance. It tumbled forward as it struggled, kicking up a cloud of dust. The giant rose and fell again. It looked like a baby that didn't know how to walk, lurching around the prefab laboratory, tearing it apart in the process.

"Get back here, Maya! It's not safe!" Misato shouted at the figure in the white lab coat as she watched the whirlwind the giant was kicking up.

THRUM! THRUM!

Misato recognized the pulse, rapid though it was.

“Is that Super Eva?!”

Its head certainly looked like that of Eva-01…

But those orange shoulder pylons look like the ones Unit One used to have. And there’s four of them. Wait, four?! It’s been modified! Did Maya do that?

Misato knew there must be a reason why Maya had been preoccupied in Cage Two, but even *she* couldn’t make such modifications this quickly.

Still, she knows something!

“Maya, what happened here? How did Super Eva return? And Shinji…”

The giant’s modified appendages were skeletal, not fit for combat. It lacked the polish of a newly installed system, and its movements seemed a bit desperate.

“Maya!” Misato approached the scientist.

“This is the only place it could have appeared,” Maya said, not looking at her.

“Appeared?” Misato asked. “Are you saying this thing came out of nowhere?!”

But Maya remained silent.

“It would be really nice if you could explain this whole thing to me.”

“I don’t think you’d understand even if I did.”

Maya watched the flailing giant, her eyes filled with surprise, expectation, and anxiety. Misato knew she couldn’t make sense of the situation herself. And she certainly couldn’t allow her friend to remain in this stupor.

“Chief Ibuki,” Misato said, acting as the Commander of Nerv Japan, whose mission was to protect human life and society from supernatural threats. “You have used a great deal of energy and resources—natural and human—without authorization. I know you and your people are exhausted. How about we have a little chat, preferably in a small room, so you can recuperate?”

Maya turned to face Misato, looking very annoyed. “I can’t stand by such a foolish decision! That will only bring destruction down on humanity…on us! We must tune this unit immediately!”

The modified Super Eva flailed, sending a block of concrete the size of a car flying past them, shaking the floor as it landed.

Misato shrugged her shoulders and took a step back. “Well, excuse me for being a fool, then.”

Maya sighed. “I apologize, Commander Katsuragi. I’ve been making restraint armor in the cage for that thing.” She’d asked others to bear her uncertainties long enough. “I took the liberty of preparing it on a hunch. This place is still the hub of reality for all individuals last seen here—even without Lilith’s Chronostatic Sphere—which is probably why the giant also reappeared here.”

She turned her back on the struggling giant.

“I don’t know how it happened, but Super Eva returned to the location of the Chronostatic Sphere, to where the decommissioning facility for Unit Zero used to be, in the old Central Dogma.”

Back inside the modified Super Eva, the A.I. had begun pouring LCL into the plug as an emergency measure after receiving information from the unit’s accelerometer. Unfortunately, it didn’t fill the plug in time to prevent the impact. Asuka yelped, clinging to Shinji’s neck as the liquid buffer failed to absorb the shock.

“Stop it, Shinji!” she yelled. “There are no enemies around!”

Shinji was still fighting the invisible foe. The giant awkwardly thrust its hands up to the sky, destroying what little balance it had. Asuka hung on for dear life, unable to tell what might come next.

“I can’t move, Asuka!” Something flashed across the display, increasing Shinji’s panic as the giant turned to see what it was. “Let go of me!”

“Stop it! That was your own shadow!”

Shinji grabbed her shoulder with his left hand. “Let go of me!”

Asuka’s thin shoulders flinched when she heard the anger in his voice, but she squeezed his hand and shouted back at him. “Not on your life!”

The shock of this forced him to look at her for the first time. He inhaled sharply. Her expression wasn't one of fury but of sadness, her hair tossing about in the LCL.

He turned away and muttered, "Sorry."

Shinji's apology seemed more reflexive than sincere, but at least his panic had subsided for the moment. Asuka floated through the LCL over to the pilot seat and pulled Shinji into her chest.

"All the power in the world and you're still a big baby." she said, her arms trembling around him.

"Asuka…?"

She quietly exhaled, bubbles drifting away like stardust, and took a deep breath of the LCL—slowly, so as to keep herself from sobbing.

"Shinji…they say you're a denizen of this dream." Asuka's lips brushed against his hair.

"This is all…a dream? I'm dreaming?"

"You *are* the dream! Your dream has invaded reality! The real you has gone missing, along with Super Eva, after you triggered the Third Impact! They say no one can survive that, but…"

Asuka held him tighter. Her chest rose and fell with the rhythm of her breathing, and Shinji could feel the warmth of her body, even through her uniform.

He could feel it. Him. Shinji. Not Super Eva.

"But I made it back! And in one piece, too! So tell me how it happened, Shinji! Tell me how I made it home!"

Asuka had kept this anxiety to herself long after her return. She'd spent a significant amount of time as the Asuka/Eva synthesis. Her mind and body had been scrambled after she was amalgamated with the ocean of organic data on the Ark. Her memories about the experience were hazy to the point of seeming unreal. She *still* found it hard to believe that she'd actually reverted to her human state.

"Asuka, move," Shinji whispered into her chest. "I was fighting Armaros on Yomotsu Hirasaka…and then the Third Impact. Right."

Shinji's eyes were open now, next to the ribbon on the front of her uniform. He was staring into the distance.

"I want to see what's in front of me," he said. Images began to

appear on the virtual display, reflecting his calm.

Where am I?

"I was in the classroom, but now… This is the ruins of old Central Dogma," Shinji said.

Asuka wrinkled her nose. "Where's Lilith's Chronostatic Sphere?"

"Armaros… He took it."

"Excuse me? What the hell have you people been doing?!"

"I could ask you the same thing, you know."

"Well, I… Stuff happened."

"Uh-huh. Stuff happened down here, too."

But what happened to me?

Shinji looked at the Eva's body through the display. "Who modified me? Maya? Where'd my Vertex wings go? I can't fly without them."

"You've got bigger things to worry about than flight right now," Asuka said. "How about standing on your own two feet? Look, you've got just the thing to help you," she said, pointing to what looked like a railing. "Use that to support you as you get up."

She was referring to the circular linear rail Maya had built around a Q.R. Signum to simulate the Tower of Babel.

"Stop treating me like a baby!"

"And look! Maya and Misato are at your feet."

"Maya, that thing is going to step on you!"

Maya was running toward the giant's foot. She stopped, beckoning Misato to come closer.

"What?" Misato asked, tilting her head.

She's like a kid in an amusement park.

Maya was beaming. "I found it!"

"Found what?"

Thrum!

The giant's heartbeat was beginning to calm down. Misato gave

Maya and the giant an apprehensive once-over before approaching them. Maya pointed to some scratches in the metal.

Are those words?

I observe from the far side of time –Ikari Gendo.

Misato gasped. The words had been etched into the otherwise pristine metal with the precision of a progressive tool. Akagi Ritsuko's name appeared next, followed by dozens of others in different handwriting. A single word connected them all at the end: *ALIVE.*

"What is—Maya?!"

Maya had disappeared behind the giant.

"There it is. The Time Brake."

The small black disc took her breath away. Shinji had slowed down the event horizon.

You have 0.8 seconds of the Third Impact left, Shinji. And you can use it however you wish, in whatever form you take.

"It's all up to you, now."

Thrum!

The rhythmic heartbeat of the Eva shook the air.

Chapter 2:
Heurtebise Over the Atlantic

Hikari had a hunch.

"It's like I can feel Ikari-kun and his Eva's heartbeat," she muttered to herself. She tilted her head and marveled.

It's good to know, but how is it possible?

"It doesn't make sense. I haven't seen or heard anything about it, so why am I ready to accept it as fact?"

Hikari was talking herself through the problem. The A.I. picked it up and transmitted her words.

<<Kommandobrücke to Heurtebise. What's going on?>> This transmission reached the Euro Eva in mid-flight. <<Is your entourage bothering you?>>

After receiving emergency repairs on a U.S. aircraft carrier, Heurtebise was now flying over the North American continent, toward the Atlantic and eventually Germany for full-scale repairs.

There wasn't a single country on Earth that would stand in the way of the heroically wounded white giant and its pilot after they'd saved the world. However, countless aircraft, from those nations—belonging to various air forces, politicians, civilians, and news outlets—swarmed around her. Even now, Hikari could see a small child waving from the cabin window of a single-engine prop plane. Heurtebise waved back.

"Heurtebise to Kommandobrücke. Herr Clausewitz, do you know if piloting an Eva gives you a sense of the vital signs of other pilots?"

<<Are you referring to Soryu Asuka Langley and Eva-02?>>

"No. But I felt the pulse of Ikari Shinji and Super Eva, both of whom are M.I.A. I have no evidence to prove this."

<<Hang on.>> The window closed itself as the transmission ended.

He's probably checking on Heurtebise's telemetry—vitals and

brainwaves, the whole package. Hope my blood pressure doesn't get the better of me.

The experience still embarrassed her, even though she was used to it, and the idea that Clausewitz could be contacting Japan to check…

His transmission window returned.

<<I'm sorry, Hikari. No response from Nerv Japan as to their current whereabouts, though they'll keep us posted. But I do hope we can see them again if they're still alive.>>

"I know they are. I'll have to visit them soon."

Why did I say that?

Hikari shook her head.

Chapter 3:
New Routine

REI TROIS AND SIX had grown used to their uniforms from the past generation—the black sailor shirts paired with long skirts. The two were currently moving the desks from the classroom into the hall in rows of three.

"What are you guys doing?" Toji asked. He was also wearing a black uniform, with his bag slung over his shoulder. "You're blocking the hallway."

"This is the only way we can take classes," Trois said, pointing to the classroom.

"Of course…" Toji said, smacking his forehead. "Can't do anything in class with that entry plug right in the middle of it. But classes in the hallway? Doesn't sound much better."

Six opened a window from inside the classroom and poked her little head out of it. "We'll open the windows. Won't be too hot or cold."

It was then that Toji noticed… *These are winter uniforms we're wearing. Weird how they don't feel hot.*

"We might as well remove this partition along with the windows and doors. Come on, boys. We've got work to do."

And so began another day of Shinji's School Life, An Ikari Yui Dream Production.

"You're here! I thought you would've disappeared by now," Asuka said to Shinji from the doorway. He was in his seat, staring at the blackboard, the air around him heavy with melancholy. Gone was his carefree smile from the day before.

Shinji had ejected his entry plug when Misato called out to him at Central Dogma. What Misato saw, however, was the modified Super Eva coming to a halt. Meanwhile, Asuka emerged alone in the empty classroom, Toji having told the other students to leave. From what he'd told her, strange lights had been emanating from the plug while she was

inside the modified Super Eva.

"Who cares whether I'm here or not? I'm just a dream, aren't I?" Shinji said, turning away.

Toji and Rei Six snorted.

"What?!" He blushed.

"At least we know you really are Shinji."

"You're sulking so bad!"

A mechanical hand and a miniature one slapped him on the back.

"Ow!"

"Whoops," Toji said. He'd forgotten to control his strength.

Toji had recovered his fleshy left hand after the battle of Novaya Zemlya, but in Shinji's dream, it had reverted to his prosthetic from three years ago. The dream used whatever memories and emotions Shinji had, from the school building to the uniforms, down to the details of Toji's arm. The prosthetic was proof that Shinji had never quite gotten over the fact that he'd almost killed Toji with Eva-03. Realizing this, Toji lightly bumped Shinji with his prosthetic fist.

"Ow! Will you stop?"

Asuka sighed. "I guess the three stooges are reunited…after a member change."

"Ha ha ha! Toji's a stooge!"

"She's talking about you, too, Six…"

Chapter 4:
Messenger

REPLACEMENT AND VERIFICATION of the modified Super Eva's components had begun. He'd managed to return as an Eva even after descending upon the Earth as a giant of light with several hundred kilometers worth of moon rock on his back. An operation to rescue his pilot, Ikari Shinji, was already underway but had been halted. The hatch refused to open, and attempts to cut it open bore minimal results. Complicating the situation was the fact that Asuka claimed to have entered the Eva from the plug in the classroom.

In the process of assembling a 3D scanner to perform an X-ray on the unit, other divisions had begun dismantling his parts. It was there that they found the corpse of an unknown man. He hadn't been dead for very long, and he was dressed in a JSSDF uniform.

Fuyutsuki proposed dealing with it internally, but Misato said, "Let's contact Lieutenant Colonel Kasuga."

Kasuga arrived only two hours later. He was already on his way toward Yomotsu Hirasaka with his Akashima unit, but he used the JSSDF's N_2 Flanker, a.k.a. the Platypus-2, to fly back to Hakone.

Nerv Japan had three more aircraft in Novaya Zemlya, aside from the one Toji had been in when it was shot down. They were used as aerial turrets, since they were equipped with positron cannons. Tonight, they were undergoing a simulation set up by an A.I. interceptor. The aircraft, which needed no runway, rumbled their graviton floaters and landed one after another in Nerv HQ's VTOL hangar.

Kasuga's Platypus-2 used Toji's IFF to land along with them. He avoided passing Mount Daikan Airport, now controlled by the JSSDF, so they wouldn't see that he was going to Hakone. This incident was liable to explode if the JSSDF caught wind of it. JSSDF senior officers, along with a medical team, rendezvoused with Kasuga at Nerv HQ to inspect the body.

"That's one of ours, all right. Master Sergeant Sakura Yoshio of the First Airborne Brigade. He's among the people that went M.I.A.

during the underground raid of Nerv HQ three years ago."

His equipment was verified to be three years old, but that could easily have been fabricated. Misato wondered whether Kasuga actually believed that bit of evidence. She was more interested in the dead man's watch and terminal, which showed a date three months after the Battle at Nerv HQ.

Was time actually progressing in the sphere?

The JSSDF scanned the body with the medical equipment they'd brought out of their field hospital. They homed in on the dead man's left arm and whispered among themselves.

"He really came from three years ago," Kasuga said, to no one in particular.

"Why do you think that?" Misato asked.

"We have medical records of his broken arm from seven months before. A bit reckless, this one," one of the JSSDF's medical staff answered.

"The recovery of his broken bones is right where it was three years ago. That's impossible, even if we accounted for malnutrition."

The master sergeant's body was stuffed in a body bag then place in a refrigerated container.

Nerv Japan wanted to respect the dead and had therefore risked a great deal by inviting the JSSDF to confirm that it was one of their soldiers.

According to Maya, Super Eva had broken through the Chronostatic Sphere, where time had stopped three years ago, and had received upgrades appropriate to its new state. Misato wanted evidence for this theory.

Three years ago, at the Battle at Nerv HQ, between the feet of giants, JSSDF special forces had been dispatched to eliminate all Nerv staff. It was then that Lilith had brought time to a halt.

"Super Eva brought the force of the Third Impact into the sphere. Master Sergeant Sakura probably saw his chance to escape and crawled into his restraint armor."

Not that I feel sorry for him. Misato shuddered from a strange déjà

vu. *The guy shot me in a different future.*

She shook her head to chase out this grim thought. “More importantly…”

They moved from the medical bay to the meeting room. While the JSSDF staff had left, along with the body of their comrade, Kasuga stayed behind, saying, “My soldiers on Yomotsu Hirasaka Island need every bit of intel I can find.”

Misato respected his wishes and agreed to share whatever they knew about the modified Super Eva. Just then, Maya returned from the cage with a new discovery.

“What’s up?” Misato asked.

Maya ran her hand through her hair. She looked haggard. The strange spirit that had previously possessed her had fled. “Basic modifications were completed on the other side. All that’s left for us to do is fit him into his new restraint armor and maybe switch some components out for more reliable ones.”

“You mean those four sheets you were working on after sending your entire team home?” Misato asked.

Maya crinkled her nose.

Misato went on. “Take two days off when you’re finished. Don’t worry about reattaching Unit Zero-F’s arm. The cage team can do that just fine.”

Maya shrugged and took her seat.

With everyone present, an image of Fuyutsuki in the command center flickered to life on the monitor.

“We speculated that time had frozen within the Chronostatic Sphere, but it looks like it has advanced by three months.”

“I don’t think so,” Maya quipped. She was the one who’d speculated that Super Eva’s modifications had taken three months to complete.

“Hang on, Maya. It’s only been a week since Yomotsu Hirasaka fell.”

“Perhaps time is accelerating on the other side.”

“It’s what?”

Maya elaborated. Shinji's mother had manipulated the dimensional door from the other side to transport Super Eva, whose time was *close* to stopping, to a place where time had completely stopped. Time had then accelerated within the Chronostatic Sphere, as if Yui was telling her husband to do something about their self-destructing son.

"Super Eva's time was close to stopping?" Misato frowned.

"The Third Impact would have happened within the sphere if time moved for him." Maya continued. "We've seen instances where Unit One would do everything in its power to make Shinji's wishes of stopping something come true. Take the freezing of Lake Ashi when Quatre's Eva fell, for example."

"So, the rapid freezing…"

"Happened on a particle level, yes. But nine percent of its heat remained. We still don't know why."

"So it can interfere with time. Are you saying it stopped its own time in order to prevent Yomotsu Hirasaka from landing?"

"We have records of the power curve of the Second Impact. The Third Impact, which happened over the Ogasawara Islands, appears to follow the same curve. A massive accumulation of energy followed by a moment of silence before the release. If it continues to follow the same rules as the Second Impact, the explosion will reach Hakone."

Misato furrowed her brow. "So…the Third Impact isn't over yet?"

Toji raised his hand. "Shinji's mom told me about that. Shinji's putting a tap over the impact with his remaining 0.82 seconds of life."

"A tap?" Misato asked.

"A tap to control it, I suppose," Maya said.

"The energy produced by the Third Impact is immense to the point of bending space-time. It's going to take a long while, but Shinji is releasing it, little by little, throughout his new life. This is his duty now."

"But isn't he just a dream?"

"Well, if the real Shinji woke up, it'd all be over in 0.82 seconds." The edges of Kasuga's lips hooked to form a smile.

"I suppose this is all funny to you, sir," Toji said.

“I apologize. All of this sounds like a fairy tale…or a horror story.”

“We can only work with what the facts have to offer,” Misato said, although she sympathized with him.

“We’re throwing all our ideas at a wall to see what sticks. How we’re going to utilize the massive amount of power in front of us is more important.”

Kasuga conceded. “Very well, Commander Katsuragi. But if you would allow me one more question: If the pilot Ikari Shinji is not the real Ikari Shinji, then where is his body?”

“The real Shinji exists,” Maya said.

“What?!” Toji exclaimed, “Wait, but…how?!”

This was her new discovery. “We’ve scanned the Super Eva and found the original plug inside the entry hatch along the spinal receiver.”

“That’s crazy. What happened when Soryu got in?”

Maya looked down at her tablet. The look on her face clearly said, *Don’t ask*. “I don’t know. Maybe it disappeared, maybe it was stacked on top of it. What we do know is about the plug itself. See?”

A figure was seated within the entry plug. The final moments of Ikari Shinji were frozen into a single image. His hands were holding the control sticks; his left clutched to his chest and his right thrust out in front of him. His mouth was open in a scream, and his bangs flew every which way. Once he resumed motion, it would all end in 0.82 seconds. The gray image of the scanner made him look like a statue.

“You’re a damn hero, Shinji.” Toji felt his heart burn within him. He couldn’t imagine what his friend had been thinking.

“What if you cut open the body? Can you get him out of there?”

“Even if we could operate on the chest, we can’t get the plug housing open. Dr. Akagi referred to it as the Untouchable Space.”

“You *did* get a message from her!”

“They were all quite surprised. None of them expected an S^2 engine to expand and form a heart.”

Maya took out an explosion-proof memory card, inserted it into the LCD tablet, and slid it over to Misato. On it was information regarding the Eva’s modification progress, along with the list of names

carved into his foot. The names didn't quite match up with the list of missing persons, though. Some had died inside the sphere. There were also messages to their family.

"There's so much I want to ask Shinji, and even more I want to tell him."

Chapter 5:
Ogasawara Eastside

THE ENORMOUS COLUMN of seawater rushing up toward the space lens collapsed as the moon on the other side changed positions. The island was visible now, though thick clouds remained after the dispersion of salt-saturated mist.

"Landing point sighted. Beginning approach."

It feels like every hair on my body is standing on end at the thought of landing on this island. Is it just me?

Warrant Officer Endo glanced around the cockpit from his command seat. His other three companions looked about as worried as he was.

<<Copy that, *409*. Standing by underwater.>>

<<Roger that, Chichijima base camp.>>

Akashima, the JSSDF's mobile weapon, had left the support submarine *I-409 Revamped* ten kilometers under the sea and was now approaching Yomotsu Hirasaka, the island that used to be part of the moon. As they approached the bay, they couldn't shake off their encounter with the black monsters from the other day.

There was something on this island.

The Akashima approached from the outer rim, through strong ocean waves, and was now climbing up the crumbly terrain. Endo smacked the display on his console repeatedly within the shaking cockpit. "It's not going away."

"Don't break it, sir," the communications officer said.

"This thing came from the moon, remember? So what's this chlorophyll reaction we're getting from the center of the island? Maybe our sensors are broken."

"The Americans reported seeing a forest through their UAVs inside the island."

"Shrikes One and Two passing overhead."

Two Platypus-2's flew over the Akashima, one of them the vessel Kasuga had used earlier. They flew in from the west, near Chichijima, where the JSSDF had set up a command center for the Akashima unit. Kasuga was there as well.

Unfortunately, the base at Iwojima hadn't withstood the waves. Yomotsu Hirasaka had creased the Pacific Plate, and the Philippine Sea had risen over the Ogasawara Islands. It would be some time before Iwojima resurfaced.

"Shrike Two to Shrike One. Flock of birds making their way to high altitude. Watch out."

"Shrike One to Shrike Two. Say again?!"

All birds capable of flight were supposed to have disappeared on the day the great flock formed a belt that covered the skies. Their innate navigation had gone haywire because of the geomagnetic disturbance, which had started when the Longinus Ring began expanding as it orbited the Earth. All over the world, people reported birds descending into a frenzy and destroying themselves.

Then Armaros had spoken through the Ayanamis. He said it was time for the Human Instrumentality Project to be fulfilled. The moon would be the new stage for creation, once it traded places with the Earth. Most of the world wouldn't have understood what this meant, even if someone had explained it to them.

But one thing was for sure. Across the globe, birds had disappeared without leaving so much as a corpse. People began whispering to each other that they'd gone to another world. Humanity had developed its own set of instincts from observing other species, and this instinct had led them to the truth.

"The birds are back!"

"Wow!"

But…are they really?

The pilots couldn't shake the foreboding they'd felt since entering the island's airspace.

What if this is the other world the birds flew to?

"Hold. Akashima to Shrike One. Detecting errors in terrain data from your flight information."

The Shrike, the JSSDF's Platypus-2, used extremely powerful synthetic aperture radar to penetrate clouds and other gases that would normally block radio waves, in order to plot out a flight path for the Akashima.

<<We'll do another sweep. Requesting grid number.>>

"From A-3 to A-5—"

"Doppler radar's picking something up! That mountain is moving! Is it a landslide?"

Low vibrations rumbled through the valley, though they weren't powerful enough to be an earthquake. Alarms started blaring inside the cockpit.

"A.I.'s detecting something… Giant threat?!"

"What?!"

"Picking up quadrupedal movement that doesn't belong to the initial vibrations."

"Stop the Akashima! Shrikes One and Two, shut off your active sense oscillators and pull out. We might be up against the monster sighted by the American UAV."

The two Platypus-2's pulled out shortly after receiving the notification. They'd been told to suppress their common sense before being dispatched to the island. Shrike One took the initiative and charged its positron cannon. They broke through the thick clouds that had gathered like cream soup.

<<Akashima to Shrikes. Be warned. Bogey looks like it's about to head up.>>

The monster was facing the sky? The Shrikes fled to even higher altitudes, passing through another gas cloud. The creature broke through the clouds like a fish breaching the surface of the ocean. They couldn't tell whether the thing had a face, but it looked like it was scanning for something.

"Shrike Two to Akashima. We have visual on the bogey. It looks like a big dog. No, like a wolf with armor. And it looks like it's melting."

Shrike One shouted in shock. <<Shrike Two, look at its crown! Behind the horn!>>

The pilot of the Shrike Two zoomed in on the gun camera. There was a red protrusion sticking out behind the horned forehead.

"Hang on…that's a humanoid with its arms stretched out!"

<<Is that one of Nerv's Evangelions?>>

The giant beast with a red Eva slapped onto its forehead barely noticed the tiny Platypus-2's. It continued to rise above the clouds.

<<A red Eva… That would be Unit T—>>

KROOOOOWL!

The Eva's roar rolled like a thunderclap. The JSSDF pilots winced at the sudden shock wave, the air around them crackling.

ROOOOOAAAAR!

Noise flooded the HMD, a long and distant howl. Then the giant sank beneath the clouds once more.

Shrike Two's pilot shook her head. "That was no dog. That was a wolf."

Chapter 6:
Here I Am

MARI HAD FOLLOWED Asuka and Six to Shinji's school, but she was pushed back by the invisible membrane at its gates. She wasn't among those who would take part in Shinji's idyllic dreamworld.

Little Mari was the pilot of the U.S. Eva Wolfpack, which had been destroyed when it consumed an excess amount of life-form data. She was now sulking her way home, one hand holding Azuchi's leash, the other holding the hand of a female security officer. They were close to the LRT station when she suddenly stopped.

"Mari?" the officer asked, thinking perhaps that the girl had yet to give up on going to school.

Azuchi, too, looked at Mari. Then the dog jumped back and began barking in surprise.

Mari's eyes were wide open, her pupils strangely dilated as she stared into the distance. She turned to the southeastern sky and started howling.

PART 2

NEON GENESIS

FINAL MODEL

EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 7:
Heurtebise

IT HAPPENED IN GERMANY, in a town called Norden, which faced the northern sea. Nerv Germany had established a base here, some distance away from the Euro Sixth Army garrison.

"What happened to it?"

Aida Kensuke stood on a steel frame, looking down from the ceiling upon the giant in the underground facility. This was the cage of the Euro Eva, Heurtebise.

"Did they get the Angel to dig for coal?"

He might be forgiven for thinking this, considering how black the Eva's hands and feet were. Something must have happened during its mission. The artificial Eva-02 had been pure white and beautiful. Now its lower half was being pressure washed because of how tainted it had become.

Still…

What could be so urgent that they needed to dispatch Heurtebise? Hikari had already buried mankind's greatest enemy.

And tomorrow's a big day for it, too.

A victory lap around Europe had been scheduled for the heroic Eva, which was why it was being cleaned, repaired, and given a fresh coat of white paint over its restraint armor.

"The angel of righteousness stays busy."

Heurtebise had been hailed as the hero who'd defeated the black giant, Armaros, and Hikari was the guest of honor.

"But never mind the people," Kensuke said. He cast his gaze upward at Armaros' Q.R. Signum embedded in Heurtebise's shoulder.

"And here I thought Armaros' graviton portal opening scales would've disappeared along with him."

Heurtebise possessed one more black plate, and it was located in the chamber of the Devil's Backbone, a Field Piercer grafted onto its left

arm, which looked like it might possess the Eva at any given moment. The veins of the two scales continued to pulse red with power.

Armaros' two lesser giants, the Torwächters, used them to open up a tunnel network. Those tunnels looked as if they were made of the same black membrane as the scales. Maybe the Q.R. Signums came from the tunnel network and not from Armaros himself? There's no way of knowing.

Kensuke shook his head, frustrated at the mysteries that still remained.

"Maybe that's why…" He looked down again at the distant floor. "Maybe that's why Nerv Germany is still a little gloomy, despite having won the battle."

Kensuke was too far up to see the looks on the crew's faces, but he could tell that they were all pale.

<<Would you like to know?>>

A voice came from nowhere. Kensuke instinctively pushed away the steel frame he was holding on to. There was still a bit of ceiling, despite him being 150 meters away from the floor, and he ducked under a steel truss to hide himself. He peeked out at the spot where he'd just been.

No one's there. I'm getting jumpy.

"What am I doing?" He was embarrassed at himself for panicking.

I could've set off the motion sensors with that much movement.

Kensuke turned around. He gasped when he saw Hikari right in front of him and backed away in shock, his back slamming against a slanted steel frame.

"Horaki…"

Hikari was wearing an older plugsuit, the black one with gold circuits running around it. She stood on the steel frame without anything to keep her balanced. She didn't even look bothered by the height.

"Run, Aida. Get as far away as you—"

An arm thrust out from under her jacket, grabbing Kensuke.

"What are you…?!"

This act knocked both of them off-balance. They were falling now,

and still Kensuke tried to understand the reason behind her actions.

Is she taking her anger out on me?

This was the conclusion he came to as he plummeted.

Hikari had become the pilot of Heurtebise because of Kensuke's—and the rest of the intelligence division's—shady transactions. She'd been bought with information and resources. The Horakis had taken the move to Europe well enough; they treated it like a holiday. Unfortunately, Armaros had thrown the Lance of Longinus around the globe at that time, and the light it gave off had turned hundreds of thousands of people into pillars of salt—including Hikari's sister.

Kensuke stopped struggling. *I guess I had it coming.*

Their free fall to the bottom of the cage continued until Heurtebise broke free of its restraints and moved its black hand to catch them.

Chapter 8:
Mutual Acknowledgement

Toji understood BLS as Basic Life Support, a course he was obliged to take to prepare for emergency situations.

Fuyutsuki corrected him. “This BLS stands for Biological Structure, a structure made of multiple theories. It gives form to a person’s crude thoughts—in this case Ikari Shinji’s—and layers it on top of the physical world.”

“Hence BLS Layer,” Toji mused. “Got it.”

Shinji couldn’t exist outside the Eva’s dream. He was like a ghost who haunted a particular classroom. Maya was growing sick of being asked about the phenomenon, so Fuyutsuki had taken it upon himself to give it a proper name.

“Writing our reports should be a lot easier now. Having to mention ‘the pilot’s dream’ to the U.N. every time is a bit iffy.” Toji bowed his head politely before following up with another question. “So, the Shinji inside Shinji’s dream…what is he, really?”

“I suppose you can think of him as an icon of the BLS stationed in reality. An avatar, if you will.”

His dream altered the properties of the BLS layered classroom. For starters, it denied entry to those unacquainted with Shinji. However, it could summon anyone who *was* known to him from a great distance, using their shallow dreaming state. Anything they were wearing would immediately be converted into the school uniforms of Shinji’s mother’s time.

Mind invaded matter in the BLS. How could Shinji know what his mother had worn to school if he’d had no memory of it? This phenomenon corroborated the theory that residual thoughts of Shinji’s mother, Yui, remained inside the Eva. It also suggested that she was responsible for the creation of the layer. Toji had even met Yui under the guise of the dead Rei Cinque within the BLS.

Currently, Six was sitting at a distance from the others, observing her Type-N robots and their search patterns on the display. She turned

and asked, “What was that about Shinji and BLS?”

“Don’t say that out loud, Six,” Toji replied. The grade-schooler raised her eyebrows and returned to her display.

“Have you found her yet?” Toji asked. She shook her aqua-colored hair. They were still looking for Mari, pilot of the U.S. Eva, Wolfpack, who’d been put under the care of Nerv Japan in Hakone…and had escaped on their watch. As much as Six wanted to go out and find her herself, if she did, she might be added to the list of missing persons.

Chapter 9:
Mari Escapes

MARI, THE UNEXPECTED GUEST, had originally hailed from Nerv U.S.A. She was a wild card and had even wanted to devour the Asuka/Eva synthesis in the past. But she was of no danger to anyone so long as she wasn't allowed inside an Eva.

After the Yomotsu Hirasaka incident, Mari, who'd previously lived on little more than animal instinct, had been reduced to constantly having her hand held. Before she'd disappeared, however, she'd howled long and hard—like a wolf.

Azuchi—Lieutenant Colonel Kasuga's golden retriever, who'd been put under Six's care—had gone missing along with Mari. The city's alert level had been raised, but none of the sensors in the infrastructure had registered anything.

"Catgirl Mari goes twirl and twirl." Six sang an original tune to herself. It jolted the security team awake, and they shifted their attention to the countryside. Unfortunately, enough time had passed that Mari's scent was too weak for the search-and-rescue dogs to pick up. In fact, the hounds had actually tucked their tails between their legs. Even without her Eva, Mari was still the alpha of all animals.

Nerv U.S.A. had originally begun splicing animal DNA into humans in an effort to increase pilot-Eva compatibility. The U.S. Eva, Wolfpack, had been heavily modified according to this principle. Mari could never stop thinking of herself as a pack.

Now, her pack was calling for their alpha, and she responded by howling back and running to them.

By the time Azuchi and Mari's tracks were found south of Tokyo-3 to the side of Lake Ashi, they'd already stowed away in in one of the aircraft at Mount Daikan's new airport. This was only discovered later, since the search team was still focused on the mountains.

"No luck with Mari?" Misato asked. She entered the command center in a simple uniform that she didn't get to wear very much. She

only needed to look at the display to answer her question.

"Afraid not, Commander. But how did the meeting with the Japanese politicians go? What's up with the New Island Committee?" Toji asked.

"It wasn't something they could talk about over the phone. Although, really, this thing's going to leak in about five seconds." Misato pressed the folder she was holding into Toji's chest.

He opened it. "Uhh… 'Regarding Tsukino Yami Island.'"

"A temporary name. Not that it's going to stick, since a U.N. goon just plucked it out of the air," Misato ranted, "but that's not the point."

Toji continued flipping through the report until he got to the page with the red Eva. "What the…? Unit Two? Why—"

"Unit Two is now a relief on the forehead of a mountain-sized monster on Yomotsu Hirasaka Island."

"What?!"

Misato weaved through Toji and the others and sat in her command chair. She took the headset at her side and contacted Cage One. "About Trois' Unit Zero. Her converted left arm and regenerated right arm are still in the tanks, right? Okay."

Toji was preoccupied with the picture taken by the JSSDF's gun camera. Eva-02 was half-buried within the forehead of the giant beast.

"Heat shock them and then use array cables to hang them over the middle of the base, right above the sarcophagus."

Misato's mad request snapped Toji back to reality. "Excuse me?!" She wanted to hang an exposed Eva's arm outside? He immediately thought of hanging fish over a doorway, mackerel and pilchards in particular, to keep evil spirits at bay. "That's enough tech to build a light aircraft carrier. What are you trying to pull?"

But Toji's snide remark only helped Fuyutsuki understand Misato's train of thought. "Are you making a deal with the devil?"

"Call Asuka for me," Misato said, returning to the matter of Eva-02.

"Are you sure? Soryu's gonna want to retrieve it."

"Like I said." Misato sighed. "We couldn't keep this a secret if we tried."

Chapter 10:
Breadth of Acknowledgement

Tokyo-3 continued to suffer aftershocks from the direction of the Ogasawara Islands after Yomotsu Hirasaka shook the plate beneath it, but school was still open. An entry plug still sat in the middle of Shinji's classroom. The students were in the black uniforms of yesteryear, and while they'd initially found the plug an annoying addition to their routine, they soon grew used to it.

Nerv command had issued a statement to the students to maintain the situation. Super Eva hadn't quite managed to prevent the Third Impact from happening, but he was keeping it at bay and was currently undergoing modifications in the cage. Shinji's vision of the BLS layer, which had manifested over the school like a ghost, was their only chance of seeing what was inside the Super Eva. As such, they couldn't afford to change the environment.

All the students of the school were children of Nerv staff. In fact, the students with the entry plug in the middle of their classroom were all pilot candidates. As young as they were, they deserved to know what this was all about. Indeed, they were fortunate to be in this position, despite the world almost ending a few days prior. They might enjoy this bit of strangeness during their remaining time on Earth.

Asuka laid her face flat on the table, a strange posture for her to be in. Shinji asked her what was the matter.

"Ugh… Just leave me alone, Shinji." Asuka mumbled, not bothering to lift her head. Her golden hair glistened on the table. She couldn't help herself. though, and eventually said, "They found Unit Two."

Shinji tried to remember what had happened during the Asuka/Eva synthesis's final moments.

"That's weird. I thought it got atomized after being bitten by Mari's Wolfpack."

"Right?" Asuka finally looked up.

"Your forehead and nose are red."

Asuka's face appeared tired and gloomy, as it usually did when she was thinking about something.

"The Longinus Ring generated the spatial lens while in orbit, which atomized Yomotsu Hirasaka and reconstituted it on the other side, close to Earth."

"Yeah. That's how the moon slab managed to land here."

Why is she reviewing this? Shinji thought.

"I was completely integrated into Unit Two's synthesis, so when it got atomized, I got reconstituted by the spatial lens, too. That's how I managed to return to my human form."

"Uh-huh. Even Mari reverted to a normal human after all the animal DNA that was spliced into her."

"That's right," Asuka said. Then she glared at Shinji, "You never liked Mari, did you? She was really sad because she couldn't get into this school, you know!"

"Don't look at me," Shinji balked, "I don't know how any of this stuff works."

In fact, Mari couldn't step into the school because she was an unknown factor to Shinji.

"But this is still your dream. Can't you just acknowledge her so she can come in? And the teachers, too? You know what? Never mind."

Shinji sighed. Was that really how things worked here?

"Anyway, back to my point. What if Mari and I weren't the only things reconstituted by the spatial lens?"

Shinji finally saw what Asuka was getting at. "So, you're saying Unit Two got reconstituted, too. On Yomotsu Hirasaka, no less. But I'm pretty sure Wolfpack ate it clean."

"Maybe it wasn't completely digested yet. I don't know, maybe the Ark's life-form data in its belly got reconstituted around Yomotsu Hirasaka. No, that wouldn't work. Maybe it's operating on a different time scale."

Shinji realized that this wasn't the meat of Asuka's worries. "You want to take Unit Two back, don't you, Asuka?"

No one could tell if Eva-02 was still usable, or if they could retrieve it, given the dangers. But making the most out of Eva-02 latent

powers had become Asuka's life's purpose. She sighed deeply. All Shinji could do was offer her a shrug before the school bell rang. Everyone scurried back to their desks. Shinji kept an eye on Asuka while returning to his.

What's gotten into her? It isn't like Asuka to be this scared.

Little Rei Six slid inside the classroom from the back—almost late, though still in uniform.

The final member of the classroom entered, and it was enough to stun everyone into silence, even Asuka, though a smile still touched the edge of her lips.

Their homeroom teacher had made an appearance at last.

Asuka called out to the class representative. "Shinji!"

"Oh! All rise!"

"Terribly sorry about the trouble," said the homeroom teacher. "It seems the school has finally seen it fit to let me in."

So this is how it works…

Shinji understood what Asuka had been trying to tell him a little better. Now, how far could he open up his dream to the outside? Toji was currently in the command center, while Trois was tuning up Eva-0.0 so it could be refit with a new arm. Rei Six was trying to fill the void left by the two absentees, but she was failing spectacularly.

Chapter 11:
Europe's Triumphant Rally

NIGHT SHIFT BEGAN in the command center.

"Any luck?"

"We're not getting anything from the North American surveillance sites, either."

There were fewer people now compared to the afternoon. Communications operators whispered among themselves in the lower deck, debating whether they should wake up their superior, who'd retreated to the nap room for the day. Network dropouts and overloads had become a daily problem, given recent world events.

"Euro media's live broadcast is doing all right, at least."

The main display showed a parade on mute. Fuyutsuki had decided to peek into the command center before retiring to his personal quarters, and he pursed his lips when he saw the television broadcast playing in a sub window. A hail of confetti fluttered about the Atomium in Brussels.

"The Europeans are holding a victory parade?"

"The moon is still expanding, and the Lance of Longinus is still circling the Earth," one of the night shift operators remarked. "I'm not sure what this parade's about."

People filled every corner off the street. The blue EU flag flew high in the center, surrounded by the flags of its member states.

"I suppose they just need one," Fuyutsuki said. "The Longinus Phenomenon turned one and a half million of their people to salt."

European rapid response soldiers rode their armed vehicles through the streets, a smile on every single face.

"Hey, those are the new maser vehicles! They're huge!"

By the time the young operator finished saying this, the maser cars were lying on their sides. For a moment, it appeared to be a trick of the camera, but upon closer inspection, the sixteen-ton vehicles really

were lying on their sides, like a bunch of cardboard boxes.

"Wha?"

"Is it an accident?"

If only.

The camera shook and rumbled as dust clouds rushed the lens at terrifying speeds. Eventually, the feed cut back to the studio, but things had descended into such panic that even the studio cameras were left abandoned. The frame switched to standby before finally playing stock footage of Heurtebise returning from space.

"What just happened?"

"I don't know. Perhaps a whirlwind? See if you can dig up more information."

The internet would've been buzzing with theories right about now, but the worldwide communications crisis had severely limited such speculation.

Fuyutsuki shouted to the comms officer on the lower deck. "Get on the priority link to Nerv Germany if the media can't come up with anything."

"About that, sir," the officer began, "We haven't been able to reach them for the last thirty minutes. They might be experiencing some hardware trouble."

"What?!"

Toji tumbled into the command center, looking significantly worse for wear. He'd been watching the broadcast in his quarters, on the off chance he might see Hikari in the parade. He'd seen the exact moment when rejoicing had turned to panic.

"What the hell is going on?!"

The feed had returned and was now playing footage through a camera whose correction software was being pushed to its limits. As it panned sideways, it showed the beautiful cityscape. In the distance, a black giant loomed, shrouded in fiery smoke.

"No!"

Armaros!

In the distance, a black giant loomed, shrouded in fiery smoke.

His armor looked a little different, but it was still covered in black scales. People ran through the streets, tripping over and trampling each other. The image shook as the camera was knocked to the ground.

On the way down, it captured an image of Armaros' left arm, which now looked like a grotesque chainsaw. A ray of light shot out of it.

The Atomium, a monument that had been erected for the World's Fair, exploded.

Screams filled the air, half of which were calling for their hero, the Euro Eva, Heurtebise. But the artificial angel didn't appear. A family in the rubble cried out for Hikari to help them. Toji felt as if he was being torn apart watching them. Mercifully, the footage ended.

Fuyutsuki put out an emergency call for Misato.

"Suzuhara," Asuka whispered. "We're going to school now."

What happened to Hikari? Where's Heurtebise? Why is Armaros…?

As frazzled as Toji was, part of him remained Acting Deputy Commander of Nerv.

"Hang on," he said, in a voice inaudible to Fuyutsuki and the rest. "We can't go to school at night. The BLS Layer only activates during school hours, since that's the setting of Shinji's dream."

"Is now really the time to worry about that?" Asuka asked.

Chapter 12:
Night Class

SNEAKING INTO SCHOOL at midnight was trickier than Toji and Asuka had anticipated. A sleepy Aoba had to teach them how to get into the school without alerting the security company.

Once they were inside, however, Asuka raised her voice. “Come on out, Shinji! We don’t got all night!”

“Soryu!” Toji exclaimed. “I know it’s night and all, but he’s not a ghost. He didn’t show up the last time you carried the entry plug in here, did he?”

“No, and it’s a good thing, too. The BLS Layer would’ve kept the science and engineering staff out of here.”

“You really put them through hell.”

They reached the classroom after an uneventful walk.

“You don’t expect me to lug this thing by myself, do you?” Asuka tapped the entry plug in the middle of the classroom. “See? Nothing. Should I turn on the lights?”

“Don’t bother. The moon’s annoyingly bright lately.”

“I mean, it’s sucked most of the Earth’s landmass and is only 110,000 kilometers away from us at this point.”

“Look, Shinji. The moon is so beautiful tonight!” Asuka pointed out the open window. Immediately, her long T-shirt and hotpants dissolved and were replaced with the black uniform.

There’s the BLS Layer!

“The transformation looks like something out of a magical girl anime.”

“You watch those things?”

“Look…”

<<His sister loved that stuff.>>

They both recognized the voice and immediately turned.

“Kensuke…?!”

A shade resembling Kensuke sat at his desk, looking exhausted.

“You know, when they were kids.”

Six was right. Shinji can summon anyone he thinks would fit into the dream, even those who are far away.

Toji had never seen anyone this blurry before, however. Perhaps something was happening on Kensuke’s end.

“Aida…?”

“Hold on, Soryu. Kensuke, where are you now?”

“I *was* in Germany, but now… Things are bad here, Toji.”

“Does it have to do with Armaros?”

“So, you’re aware. Those final moments happened so fast. Darkness spread all over that white body, over Horaki and Heurtebise. They’ve become Armaros.”

Toji slammed the table. “What?!”

Chapter 13:
Evil Unto Evil

Alarms detecting hostile movement blared throughout the command center.

"That was quick," Fuyutsuki said. "Hold! Do not engage urban combat protocols!"

"Do not shoot!" Misato added for good measure.

<<This is Trois. Unit Zero ready at Komagatake sniping post.>>

"Thanks. Proceed as planned."

<<Please don't shoot me,>> a voice identical to Rei Trois said.

<<IFF signal registered to Quatre's Eva! Coming in from old Owakudani!>>

"Quatre…!"

Rei Trois heard the voices of Ayanami Rei Quatre and Hyuga in her entry plug. Eva-0.0 had shed its bulky zero-gravity and pressure-restraint armor in favor of lighter equipment. She'd packed its gamma-ray laser cannon for the mission and was now pointing the weapon north. The accuracy of the zero-gravity cannon would normally suffer under the Earth's atmosphere, and the mechanisms were already warning Trois of the damage that might be done to the barrel. But no matter. Accuracy wasn't a problem at this distance.

Old Owakudani was a region where volcanic steam gushed out of Mount Hakone. Vegetation was scarce in the area, and yet something appeared to be cropping out of it now. Trois zoomed in to get a better look.

"This is Trois to command. Target in sight. Our guest has arrived."

An orange-and-black mutant Eva rose out of the ground through the tunnel network. Looking at its Angel Carrier wings, no one could tell that this chimera used to be identical to the Eva-0.0 Trois was piloting.

Chapter 14:
Night Class II

Alarms blared throughout the city.

For Toji and Asuka, they sounded distant because of the shocking news they'd just heard: Heurtebise had become Armaros, and Hikari was caught up in it. They couldn't believe what Kensuke was saying.

"What are you saying?" Asuka couldn't remain quiet.

"I don't know."

"I'll go to Europe. There's a Platypus on the VTOL deck. If I fly it as fast as I can—" Toji raised his fists. He fully intended to abandon his post as Acting Deputy Commander.

"I think that'd be a waste of time," Asuka said.

"Why?!" he shouted. But he then conceded. "You're right…" He didn't know what to do anymore. He banged on the table again.

"Toji, I think what Soryu's trying to say is that Armaros can teleport." Kensuke tried to ease the tension.

"That's right," Asuka said. "If we're going to fight that thing, then we'll have to meet him at his destination!"

Toji's legs wobbled, and he leaned back into his desk for support. *And where is that supposed to be?*

"That's where my sword is, too," Asuka whispered. "Ugh, I knew it was going to end like this."

Kensuke raised his eyebrows.

She turned around and started talking to an empty desk. "Take Shinji, for example. Why does he get in an Eva after defeating a powerful enemy? Operating an Eva is a negative action in itself. His rule was that he would only use one as long as he could prevent a greater disaster by doing so. But I'm not sure we can wait for the enemy to make the first move in this case."

Kensuke felt lightheaded. *She's still thinking about the aftermath of the battle.*

He'd joined the intelligence division after being passed over to be a pilot. He'd had his ideals, but he'd long since abandoned them.

"You wanna put your money where your mouth is?" he asked.

"Of course! But first…" Asuka pointed south-southeast. "We're going to Yomotsu Hirasaka. That's where we'll meet Armaros."

"On the new island?" Toji wondered. "Wait… That might be it! We won't have to look for him. Armaros is sure to come for us if we stir up trouble there. Yomotsu Hirasaka might be our opportunity to take the initiative."

"Right?" Asuka said. "The spatial lens is directly above the island, siphoning seawater to the moon. It's like a giant umbilical cable creating the new world. The black giant will definitely come for us if we cut it off. Isn't that right, Shinji?"

"Yeah."

Shinji had appeared at some point and was now sitting on top of the entry plug.

"Come on, Toji!" he said with rare enthusiasm.

Kensuke couldn't bear to watch them. *Why did I ever leave this place?*

Yomotsu Hirasaka. That was where Eva-02 was. Asuka desperately wanted her Eva back. And if there was a chance to confront Armaros—and save Hikari—all the better.

The school bell rang in the dead of night. It was an effect of manipulating the timer to sneak past security, but it signified the beginning of a separate reality. Kensuke smiled as he faded away. His physical body was probably waking up.

The entrance to the local shelter was located on school grounds, so the neighborhood watch started investigating the school as soon as they heard the bell ring. Frantic beams of light pierced the window panes, grazing Asuka's skin.

"Let's get out of here. I don't wanna explain myself."

"Oh, boy," Toji muttered. "Shinji…"

Shinji was getting into the entry plug. "I know. It's my turn. And Toji?"

“Yeah?”

“I’ll do everything I can,” he said, subtly reminding his friend not to do anything rash.

Toji clenched his fists. “All right!”

He was encouraged by his spectral friend.

Chapter 15:
With a New Name

QUATRE'S MUTANT EVA stood waiting outside, clearly hostile.

The matter pressed upon Maya's mind as she prepared to evacuate Super Eva, the whereabouts of whose pilots were unknown, along with the replica Longinus by way of the underground rapid rails.

Is the heartbeat getting faster?

Maya had devoted all of her time to fitting Super Eva with his new restraint armor. At first, she thought the exhaustion had finally gotten to her, but the change was real enough. She looked up. *There's light in his eyes!*

"Everyone step away from the Eva!"

Cage personnel were caught off guard by her declaration. They immediately stopped working and started running.

"Never mind the cable management! Shinji-kun, are you there?!"

<<Maya-san,>> Shinji said, through Super Eva's external speakers. His consciousness had returned to Super Eva as soon as he entered the plug in the classroom.

<<I really don't have wings anymore. How is this thing supposed to fly?>>

"You'll never know until you try," Maya said.

<<All right, then.>>

"What?"

Toji and Asuka were returning from the school.

Searchlights mounted upon the other divisions of Nerv headquarters lit up its center, which was shaped like a satellite dish. Everyone had been started by the sudden appearance of Quatre's mutant Eva. Turncoat Rei Quatre stood at the tip of the Q.R. Signum in the mutant Eva's chest, wearing Shinji's plugsuit. She noticed Toji and Asuka, and waved to them. The mutant Eva copied her.

The one-armed mutant grabbed the Eva arm dangling off the cables hooked to antenna arrays and grafted it onto its right shoulder.

“I guess that was bait,” Toji mused, finally understanding Misato’s plan.

In the middle of the reflector, a vertical shaft offered a view down to the sarcophagus covering the old Geofront. This was the same shaft through which Quatre had once infiltrated the command center, so everyone was understandably nervous. The air was electric as Trois trained her rifle on Quatre from the Komagatake sniping post, ready to fire at a moment’s notice.

The searchlights lit up another spot, some distance away from Quatre’s Eva. It was there that Katsuragi Misato, commander of Nerv Japan, confronted Kaji Ryoji, vessel of Seele.

Misato ruminated over the facts—facts she couldn’t bring herself to believe.

“So, the black giant going wild in Europe… You’re saying that the Euro Eva is now Armaros? Why?”

“Because the Euro Eva killed Armaros.”

“That can’t be…”

“And if the son of Gendo defeats the Euro Eva with Unit One, he and Unit One will become Armaros. If Asuka Langley defeats that black giant with Unit Two, *they* shall become Armaros.”

“We can’t be rid of him.”

“Correct,” the Kaji-vessel said, somberly. Under the three spotlights, the shadow of his two arms multiplied into six. “It’s a fundamental truth of this world. Nothing ever changes.”

“You’re wrong… That’s insane! Even if it were true…why have we been fighting this whole time? Just so we can say we tried?!”

“Thus my question: ‘Satisfied?’”

The Kaji-vessel didn’t so much as grin. Misato felt as if the real Kaji was admonishing her.

“Nothing changes. The one who defeats the most powerful being in existence simply becomes the new black giant. That’s all.”

The black giant was the minister of the Human Instrumentality Project, which would continue to exist as long as there were humans.

"And that's the Evangelion?"

"No. This is all part of the Mechanism, which is part of the Ark." The Kaji-vessel sighed. "You did good, Katsuragi."

Don't say it like he used to!

But her spirit had already been broken.

Toji and Asuka had made it to the VTOL deck. They contacted the command center for permission to operate the Platypus-2.

<<You know how clumsy Soryu is. Apparently, she left something huge on Yomotsu Hirasaka.>>

<<Oh, no you don't. Sensei! This guy was planning to fly all the way to Europe before I told him where we should go!>>

The two were pointing fingers at each other like children. Misato listened to their banter.

What is going on back there?

Their tone didn't reflect the hopeless situation that had just been presented to her—the inevitable remodeling of the world and the implacability of Armaros.

"Stop your bickering! Don't you know this is an emergency?!" shouted Fuyutsuki. "You have orders to stand down. Act your age!"

<<We're acting *because* it's an emergency!>> Asuka shouted. <<We're going off to save our friend and pick Unit Two up along the way. It sure as hell beats sitting around and doing nothing. This is the final act, and I'd much prefer to go out with a bang!>>

The final act.

Asuka's words rang throughout the command center.

She has a point. If there's anything after this…

But no. Everyone felt that Armaros' resurrection was a sign that whatever came after this was the end. Fear, or perhaps determination, coursed through the veins of all present in the command center.

<<Commander!>> Hyuga's voice came through the comms. <<It's Cage Two! Super Eva is on the move!>>

Misato gasped, realizing that Shinji had agreed with his classmates. They'd been on the defensive ever since Novaya Zemlya, always reacting, while never really solving anything. Now, she felt the push toward action.

<<Can we go now, Misato? You can't keep us any longer!>>

<<Fuyutsuki-sensei, I leave the rest to you.>>

<<You two!>>

Misato frowned and sighed deeply, scratching her head.

"List their flight under reconnaissance! Hyuga-kun, rewrite the code for Super Eva."

Misato directed her next question to Fuyutsuki, who'd gone silent over her headset. "No objections, Assistant Acting Deputy Commander?"

<<And what is it that I must object to?>> the old man replied. Fuyutsuki had long ago decided that he would go with whatever policy Nerv Japan enacted. His only job was to give everyone a dose of common sense.

<<Now accepting new registration code!>> Hyuga said, waiting for Misato's command from the middle deck.

These damn kids. They'd sulk in a second if we stopped treating them like adults!

Misato looked into Kaji's eyes and said, "May the world never need another Evangelion. Evangelion-01 Final Model, lift off!"

The power lines were still damaged from the previous battle. The remaining city lights went out as what little power remained was spent. Behind Misato, the 3,500-ton giant leaped into the air. Shinji took a deep breath of LCL as the powerful acceleration shifted into weightlessness. He clutched his grip uttered a single word.

"Fly!"

The four pylons of the newly christened Final Model shifted positions, wrapping around the small black circle on his back, the Time Brake. Four black wings sprouted out of it—the wings of the giant of light.

Asuka whistled. She was already seated inside the parallel duplex cockpit of one of the new Platypus-2's, issued to replace the one lost at

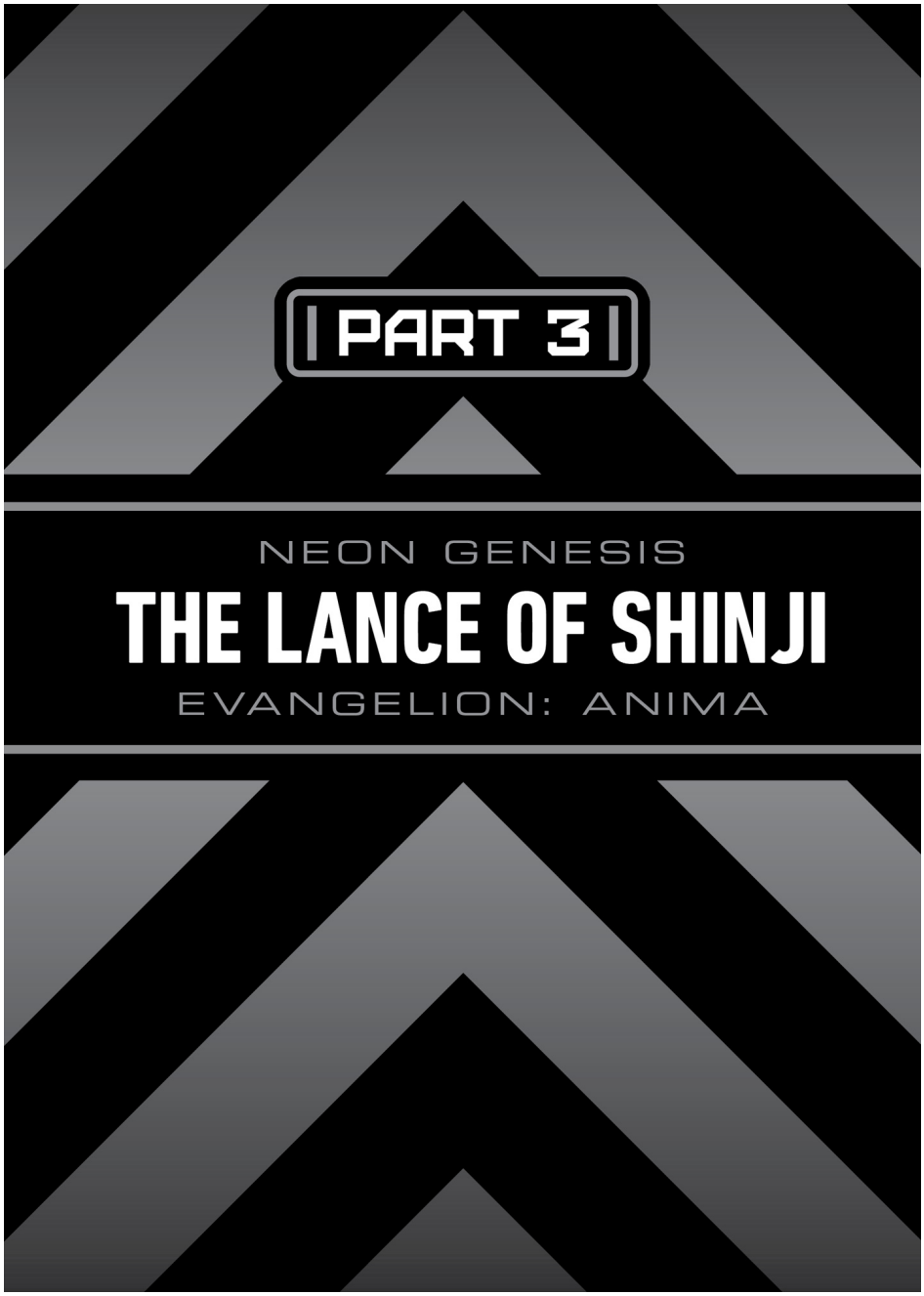
Novaya Zemlya. Toji cheered from outside the craft when he saw the wings of light; he was still setting up the cargo pods. The wings were relatively closed, and they seemed to push Final Model through the air more than anything else. Shinji sped through the east side of the caldera and vanished from sight. Burning particles scattered behind him like feathers, leaving an afterimage of the wings.

The 120-meter-tall giant left a shock wave as he went away, but the caldera still rumbled.

“All right, Toji,” Misato said. “I know this seems like a waste of time to you, but I hope you’ll tune in to our worthless struggle.”

THE 3,500-TON GIANT
LEAPED INTO THE AIR.

"Fly!"


PART 3
NEON GENESIS
THE LANCE OF SHINJI
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 16:
Sudden Turn

THE MOON'S REVOLUTION had been significantly reduced, thanks to its increased size, and it once again aligned with the spatial lens over Yomotsu Hirasaka. The great pillar of seawater reappeared, shooting into space, as the moon siphoned the Earth's materials. This was the second time this had happened.

Even with two reconnaissance aircraft, the JSSDF Akashima had lost sight of the four-legged giant beast with Eva-02 plastered to its head, which was absurd considering the sheer size of the thing. The beast as big as a mountain had disappeared as if it had dissolved into the Earth itself.

Many nations had surrounded the Pacific Ocean, three of which had approached the island using large, amphibious submarines. The North American Alliance, the South American Coalition, and the Chinese Far East Collective all landed on Yomotsu Hirasaka, and a force of about ten thousand began making its way to the center of the island. Half of them were researchers, while the other half carried N_2 bombs.

Heurtebise's transformation into Armaros had not been widely disseminated, mainly because of the Europeans' own disbelief. But news of the black giant's reappearance had spread like wildfire, and the rest of the world soon heard of the horrors that had occurred in Europe. They prepared themselves for the violence that was to come.

If Yomotsu Hirasaka was discovered to be the vanguard of the apocalypse, it would need to be blown to pieces.

The Akashima, JSSDF's anti-Angel unit, was now calling on all nations to withdraw from the island.

"You are encroaching upon Japanese waters protected by international law!"

Over the hills leading to the mountain at the heart of the island, the Akashima and Shrikes One and Two were engaged in a standoff with offensive aircraft that appeared to share the Platypus-2's N_2 graviton floater platform.

In fact, these three nations had approached Japan several times to seek their cooperation, but the government of the archipelago hadn't responded.

Part of it was the chaos at the heart of the government due to the recent disasters, but it was also the fact that Nerv Japan had been given more authority to respond to such disasters in a timely fashion. The attempts to limit Nerv's actions in Japan had backfired.

"Do these Japanese not realize this is an emergency?" A gunner from the U.S. Navy's aerial platform disengaged the Akashima from his sights, though he kept his hands on the console so he could lock on to it again if need be.

"The Chinese Far East Collective probably think they can do anything so long as they have their Evangelions."

"Hah! They needed Germany to buy them time when Armaros whooped them back in Europe!"

Back on the island, soldiers and scientists of different nations discovered a dreamlike world as they advanced. They found colonies of young plants with vibrant colors, and even identified species that were thought to have gone extinct ages ago.

"This is supposed to be a chunk of moon rock."

They'd come to destroy this abomination but instead found themselves awestruck.

"This is brilliant."

"Paradise!"

Their emotions stood in conflict with their mission.

How had so much greenery cropped up on a rock that had fallen from outer space?

Soldiers set up observation towers to record the devastation left by the N_2 bombs nanoseconds after they destroyed this utopia.

Each held the tools of destruction in their hands, and some peered through the lens of the terminal to record the moment Paradise was brought low by human hands. Perhaps there would come a moment in the future where the data would prove useful.

If any of them survived.

As the soldiers advanced around a great wall of rock, they came across another startling sight in a deep valley.

“Isn’t that the thing intel told us about?”

“Bingo!”

They looked upon a large, gray cube, shining like glasswork.

The Ark.

It was a collection of terrestrial life information that had disappeared after Armaros transported it away from the Atlas Mountains in North Africa.

The Ark turned slowly, concealing its true form as the main method of jump-starting the Human Instrumentality Project.

Chapter 17:
Shinji

WHAT HAD BECOME of Shinji's body? Was he truly human at this point?

The question had first been asked when he was regenerated within Super Eva. He'd begun sharing its existence ever since the Eva's heart took the place of his own.

And now, he was a dream. A dream within an Eva. A representation of what Shinji saw in the classroom.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't bothered by it.

He had no sense of time and space.

It feels like I'm living in one point and then another.

"Get in, Shinji," Asuka had said confidently.

"What? No!" He'd frowned and refused.

He snorted, laughing at this memory.

Eva-01 Final Model's shoulder pylons shifted in the direction of Yomotsu Hirasaka. The wings of light extending from behind it propelled the Eva with tremendous force.

It was a strange sensation, and Shinji felt as if his perspective had been squashed. He could see the Izu Peninsula—now an island—far away, but by the time he registered it, the distance between them had closed. He was already zooming past it.

"So light."

The four-thousand-ton Super Eva had felt light because of his immense propulsion potential. Now the restraint armor was even thinner, and he felt lighter. Still, gigantic objects can't move quickly by their very nature. The period of pendulum movement was determined by the length of a thing and not its mass.

This feels like the dream…

The raging output felt like it could break the laws of Newtonian physics.

Shinji brimmed with the worst power in the world. The peak of the Third Impact's energy, the energy that flowed through his heart from a higher dimension, threatened to wrench open his chest *through* the time compression. This violent knocking rumbled through every inch of Final Model's body at regular intervals, forming the Eva's heartbeat.

THRUM!

The all-consuming power was somehow offset by reverberations created by the artificial Kodama in his chest.

"I feel fine…for now."

This was Shinji's current reality.

"Toji, where are you?" he called out to the N_2 Flanker Platypus-2.

<<Shinji…you're going…too fast…>>

They could still communicate through electromagnetic waves, though Toji's voice was lagging and distorted. It was then that Shinji realized his thoughts were traveling at an immense speed.

Still too fast… Calm down.

Final Model had been in a constant state of acceleration ever since Hakone, and now it slowed in order to allow the Platypus-2 to catch up to it.

Chapter 18:
Nerv Japan

"You're certainly making things harder for yourselves." Kaji Ryoji grinned as he watched Eva-01 Final Model fly toward the eastern sky. "Well, then. Don't suppose I can have some tea?"

The vessel that contained Seele had somehow retained Kaji's manners, but the sight of it was still off-putting, even to those who knew the circumstances.

"Cafeteria's open," Misato said. "Help yourself. Only the vending machines are around to serve you at this hour, though."

"I know where it is."

Misato ignored Kaji's smug grin and motioned for security to escort their guest.

"What about you, Quatre?" She looked up at the mutant Eva. "Get you anything?"

Ayanami Rei Quatre stood on top of the unit's chest, admiring her new arm. She extended it and curled it, the Eva syncing its movements with her while emitting metallic, muscular creaks.

She looks really hot in Shinji's plugsuit. Age must be getting to me if I'm thinking of that kind of stuff.

Rei Quatre provided a succinct reply. "No."

I guess she has to be ready to retaliate in case anything happens to Seele. According to Shinji and Trois, Quatre isn't really controlled by Seele/Kaji the way she was controlled by the Q.R. Signum. It'd be closer to the truth to say that she partnered up with him out of curiosity.

"Do you have fun leading young girls on?" she asked the Kaji-vessel.

"The puppet was the one who led *me* on, in this instance. She was the one who insisted we attend this gathering."

"Really."

"Either way, I can't get off to her. I can't get off to any girl under

the age of thirty-two."

You keep adding extra years to that, you jerk.

Security escorted Kaji Ryoji from the top deck. The thirty-two-year-old commander of Nerv, Katsurage Misato, looked to the sky in the direction of Super Eva—Eva-01 Final Model.

"I got a scare when I saw those wings of light come out of him," Misato said to Maya over her headset.

< <Shinji requested the installation of Vertex wings, but he already has wings with the Eva's ability to stop time indefinitely. The four shoulder pylons aren't really flight units. They're quantum wave mirrors, like the restraint armor around his heart. > >

"You need two, three layers to stop his heart from exploding?"

< <Yes. They form a sort of bottleneck to prevent instantaneous release of that tremendous energy. That's the part we can see. > >

"The Time Brake. The little black void on his back."

< <Eva-01 Final Model can freely use the Third Impact's energy, the most immense energy in the known universe. It could take years to trickle that energy out, or 0.82 seconds to blow it all at once. It all depends on Shinji. > >

"A cruel business. How much does he know?"

< <All of it. > > Maya had tried to keep him from leaving. < <I told him how changing the pylons' formation would alter the shape of the brake field and how it would cost him his life every time that happened. It only steeled his resolve. > >

Chapter 19:
Life-Form Deluge

THE MULTI-NATION EXPEDITION was thrown into disorder upon discovery of the Ark. Dispersed soldiers turned into pillars of salt one after another. The N_2 powered field seemed to act as an umbrella against this, and the surviving troops retreated, huddling under their N_2 reactor-powered vessels for protection. N_2 explosives were activated, cutting off escape even for soldiers who'd managed to avoid saltification. Reports came in slowly about how they were being attacked by an unknown force, but their formation had descended into chaos.

"Is that the one?" Endo asked from the Akashima's command seat. The JSSDF's mechanical giant currently hovered high over the troubled ground, turbines whirring and artificial musculature creaking as it surveyed the situation. Its spotter, Shrike One, had reported a large number of moving objects over the ridgeline.

"Are the troops…retreating?" It was a reasonable conclusion, given the direction the mass was headed.

<<It's not human,>> Shrike One replied. <<Although, we've had reports of horses and deer being sighted in the area.>>

"I don't think we're dealing with any of those."

Maxing out his zoom, Endo saw animals of every conceivable species flowing out of the ridge. At first, it appeared to spout only terrestrial beasts, but unknown life-forms soon followed.

I have a bad feeling about this.

Chapter 20:
Stowaway

TEN KILOMETERS AWAY from Yomotsu Hirasaka Island, the Akashima's support vessel, the *I-409 Revamped*, resurfaced in order to ventilate. This particular feature had been retained even after its enhancement. Not everything went as scheduled, however. They'd picked up a stowaway when the vessel resupplied at Chichijima.

"Over here!"

Mari let go of the ladder to make a foothold for Azuchi, the golden retriever. The big dog stepped on her hands and leaped out, then followed through the hatch and hopped out of the vessel herself. She easily slipped by the guard who'd been posted on sea level.

"Sorry for the free ride. You can bill Nerv U.S.A.," the girl said. She and the dog jumped into the ocean.

They didn't send any lifeboats for her. They couldn't, really.

Alarms notifying the approach of a bogey blared, and the crew scrambled to their battle stations. Sonar picked up the propulsions of several large submarines retreating from Yomotsu Hirasaka. It was as if Azuchi and Mari were trying to replace them by swimming toward it.

Ogasawara Mobile Command wondered if they were up against large submarines of American, Chinese, and Australian origin. The order to halt resurfacing procedures was immediately issued after a preemptive noisemaker was fired from the extended VLS to the nose of the unknown vessel.

"Don't shoot!" the unknown party responded. The bogeys surfaced, revealing themselves to be super-class submarines that dwarfed the *I-409 Revamped*. They continued advancing, ignoring all warnings.

The XO of the *I-409 Revamped* heard a strange sound ring throughout the inside of the approaching ships.

"Their load is a lot lighter. There aren't any soldiers within their

cargo. What happened to the people they left on the ground?”

They’d deserted the landing party, wanting to get away from this place as soon as they were attacked.

The sky at the northern tip of the island rumbled.

Eva-01 Final Model flew 1,200 kilometers in a straight line from Hakone at blinding speed and decelerated instantly over Yomotsu Hirasaka, as if he were weightless. He stretched out his arms, and the trail left behind by his wings of light dispersed, scattering particles that looked like burning feathers.

If the landing party’s cameras had still been rolling, they would have recorded the soldiers being contaminated by the life-form data streaming out of the Ark. Not only that, they would have captured the Angel Carriers regenerating from those scattered bits of data and rising to intercept the Eva.

Chapter 21:
Crowd

The Akashima stood in wait, unsure of how to deal with the black life-forms coming over the hill. Their movement was unnatural. Most were quadrupeds, but they had none of the stability associated with animals. They all seemed as if they might trip under the tidal wave of their own mass.

"IFF active scan complete," Endo said. "It's positive!"

"What?!"

Identification tags of the United Nations emergency forces from the operation at Novaya Zemlya were mixed in with the beasts that approached them.

Are they being run down by these animals?

"Arm Mode: Rescue! Trace their dog tags and pick them up!"

The A.I. picked a small creature out of the pack and set it on top of the giant arm.

"Error with rescue protocol! That thing's not human! Again!" Endo commanded. But the animal on top of Akashima's palm crumbled into white powder before the A.I. had a chance to pick up another one. Among the remains were torn bits of camo fabric that scattered in the wind.

A chill ran through the four operators of the Akashima when they recognized what their display was showing.

No!

Incessant banging on their armor brought them back to their senses.

"Maintain forward position and retreat!"

"We're going back to the valley with the third flag! Accelerate thrusters and don't let those things come near us!"

"But they—" the pilot hesitated, biting back the words "might have been human once." The thought of harming or killing such

creatures…

“It’s too late now!”

The animals couldn’t hit the Akashima hard enough to get through its layers of armor, of course.

But they could hear it.

They could hear the desperate sound of hundreds of feet crawling up the mech. They wanted something, but they shattered into white sand before they could make their desires known.

The chromatograph showed that the white palm prints were made of pure sodium.

Chapter 22:
Asuka

"Our nose is about to get burned!"

The Platypus was still chasing Shinji's Eva-01 Final Model, and it had long since broken the sound barrier. In fact, it was about to break the thermal barrier. Its N_2 reactor not only powered the graviton floaters but also emitted a defensive repulsor field. Their speed was so great that heat had gotten through their invisible barrier, burning the tip of the aircraft's nose cone.

"We've arrived at our destination."

Toji woke Asuka, asleep next to him, while he shifted the propulsion lever back to neutral.

"Just let me off at the nearest convenience store." She stirred from her slumber, staring anxiously out the side canopy. She was about to pull her jacket up to her chin when her eyes suddenly widened. "Bad!"

"Bad what?"

"Lower your altitude! But not too low."

"Care to be specific? What's that…?"

A wild variety of animals streamed out of the forest. Each followed its own instincts, devouring everything in sight.

"Didn't know there were animals here."

Toji zoomed in through the gun camera to get a better look, tilting the ship toward the side canopy since Asuka had seen it fit to stick herself against it. He noticed her trembling shoulders.

"That's…me! That's me!"

"Soryu?"

"That's me. *They*… They're all me!"

"Soryu, calm down!"

Asuka clawed at the polycarbonate canopy, as if unable to contain the flood of memories rushing out of her.

“The Ark… Is it here?!”

Asuka had come into contact with the Ark on the moon during her reconnaissance mission. The deluge of life-form data had crashed through her, breaking her consciousness from the inside. She’d lost what made her Asuka in the torrent.

Her mind had been overwhelmed by the data, and just when she was about to be lost in the flood, Eva-02 had stepped in to protect her. Her limited consciousness was absorbed into the Asuka/Eva synthesis, and so she’d continued to exist—would have continued to exist, if she hadn’t been reconstituted as a human being by chance.

The rush of emotions hit Asuka’s brain so hard that it told her to vomit. She hyperventilated, threw the HMD helmet behind her, and unzipped the front of her jacket.

“Urgh… Mind if I hurl?”

“Soryu, no! We’ve got Angel Carriers at ten o’ clock!”

Several Carriers came out of the ridge of the mountain, flapping their terrible white wings.

“They’re fighting. Now, where’s Armaros…? He’s not here?!”

“Make enough noise and he’ll be here!”

Dammit. We were so focused on fighting Armaros, I forgot he had backup!

“Soryu, charge the positron cannons!”

Toji began mental calculations to use the frontline base on the Ogasawara Islands.

Chapter 23:
Battle at New Island

Sparks flew as the tip of the Bizen Osafune broke through the field of a Carrier to lodge itself in its head. Shinji left the blade where it lay, letting go and grabbing Armisael's double helix as its cocoon rose out of the Carrier's abdomen.

Eva-01 Final Model flew past the Carrier while yanking the torn helix through the blade in its head with all his might. The remaining helix of the Angel larva spun furiously as the sword unraveled it by force. It let out a hideous screech before it died.

The Angel Carrier was still alive, but it stumbled when the cord in its belly was pulled free. The Q.R. Signums in its shoulders were dispatched with some well-placed shots from the lighter version of the Powered 8 railgun, the Powered 8 CL.

Asuka and Toji watched from the Platypus.

"That's something else…"

"Why aren't the other Carriers attacking?"

Because the Armisael Carrier was bait.

As the Eva-01 Final Model pulled away from the rapidly deteriorating remains of the Carrier, the other four surrounded him, sticking their staves into the ground.

"That's the Tower of Babel! They're enclosing him in a pyramid, like back on Novaya Zemlya!"

Asuka sank into her seat as Toji charged toward the nearest staff.

"Don't miss, Soryu!"

"What?!"

On her HMD helmet, a crosshair formed on the tiny staff in the distance. Asuka pulled the trigger, but the positron cannon blasted the right arm of the Carrier holding it instead of the staff itself.

"You suck at this! This is what happens when you do too much mental targeting!"

“Sh-shut up!”

The Platypus realigned itself, but it flew by the staff before they could get another shot.

No!

Just then, a blast from an energy weapon kicked up a dust cloud. Someone else had destroyed the staff for them.

“That’s the JSSDF’s… What was it called again?”

“Akashima.”

The pyramid formed around Final Model even with a missing staff. The Eva tried to escape to no avail. By now, shots aimed at the remaining staves couldn’t penetrate the field. The Carriers stepped harmlessly through the enclosed space, charging up their vast energy.

The Akashima was accelerating backward as it distanced itself from the pyramid.

< <Akashima to Nerv. Keep your distance from that structure! The Tower of Babel causes disruptions in communications, even energy communications. Your signals *will* be affected.> >

“Thank you, Endo-san. Our experiments at Nerv showed that using a single staff lessened the disruptive effects of the pyramid. We did simulations with three staves, too.”

< <Acting Deputy Commander? Why aren’t you at HQ? Anyway, Akashima to Nerv. There’s one remaining Carrier that didn’t make it into the pyramid. It’s the one whose arm you blew off. Be on the lookout.> >

We knocked one out for you, Shinji. The rest is up to you.

The Tower of Babel’s rainbow membrane was too tough even for Eva-01 Final Model to break through at full power. The Angel Carriers inside the tower swelled to great proportions, their skins cracking to make room for the new growth.

Shinji yelped in surprise as one of the giant Carriers leaned toward him. Though it had yet to attack, he drew the Bizen Osafune, which was far too large for melee combat in this enclosed space, and pointed it at the enemy. The Carrier paid no heed to the weapon and fell upon Eva-01 Final Model, intent on crushing him.

“What the hell is up with this thing?!”

The Bizen pierced its belly, and liquid poured out of its cocoon.

“Gah!”

The pain upon touching it was immediate. The fluid continued to burn Eva-01 Final Model’s restraint armor, and it ate a hole in the ground when it dripped down.

“Acid!”

Is it Matarael in that cocoon?! It hurts…but I can take it!

Final Model tried to regain his footing, but he couldn’t outrun the four long legs that crawled out of the cocoon. They grabbed him in midair, presumably intending to slam him into the ground.

Shinji braced himself as he felt the distance between them and the ground reduce to nothing.

But the impact never came.

Matarael’s acid had burned the Earth away, exposing a cave network. Final Model and the Carrier tumbled into the darkness.

Chapter 24:
Into the Depths

“What?!”

Once past the initial resistance of the corroded ground, Final Model found himself in free fall.

Was this an underground cave system?

“Dammit!”

He attempted to spread his wings on instinct, but the shaft was too cramped. The wings slammed into the wall behind him, and the force violently bounced him around within the stone cavity.

I’m putting out so much energy, I can’t make fine adjustments!

Final Model’s wings dispersed. He’d escaped the legs of the Carrier, but now he experienced a kind of vertigo as he rattled down the shaft. He didn’t know which way he was facing, but at least he knew where up was.

Matarael crawled across Final Model’s back, as if blocking his escape path. It kicked its long legs into his body, sending the Eva tumbling. His free fall continued. He tried activating his wings of light again, but they only slammed his body into the wall.

I’m heading straight down.

I'm heading straight down.

He'd inadvertently fallen into a deep fissure that ran vertically along Yomotsu Hirasaka. While it wasn't a wide crevice, it was wide enough that you couldn't span it by spreading your arms. Shinji extended his A.T. Field outside of himself, scraping the walls behind and in front of him to slow the free fall.

The Carrier gave chase as soon as he slowed down. Matarael's four long legs extended out of its belly like a lance. It brought its spear down on the spherical A.T. Field, which Final Model had formed to prop himself against the wall. He blocked the attack with the Bizen, but Matarael's legs were harder and sharper than before, possibly an effect of the Tower of Babel. Shinji slanted his sword, redirecting his enemy's attack, and slashed up. Sparks flew as the two switched places in free fall.

He plunged the blade into the underside of the Angel Carrier and pulled it out again with great force. The blow lopped off the Carrier's arm, along with the Q.R. Signum in its shoulder.

Pressure and temperature rose around him. Shinji looked down into the fissure and saw a faint red glow. He'd succeeded in reducing the force of the two-hundred-kilometer moon rock, but it had done plenty of damage all the same. Its impact had opened fissures all over the Earth's crust.

That red glow must be magma.

Perhaps the impact had caused it to overflow, or perhaps it was escaping through a crack in the bottom of the sea.

Either way, lava had risen from the core to form a magma pool at the bottom of this fissure. But there were circular rocks peeking out of the lava that looked like they might make a good foothold.

Final Model put the Bizen to one side as his left hand held one of Matarael's legs at bay. He slipped past its other legs, lunging to the front of the Carrier as the Angel's remaining three legs tried to enclose him. The Eva was too fast for it, and the Carrier's back slammed into one of the circular islands in the magma. Final Model brought his knee strikers down upon the cocoon in the Carrier's abdomen, crushing Matarael's larva.

The one-armed Carrier thrust its hand at the Eva, but the Bizen quickly destroyed its remaining Q.R. Signum with a side swipe.

Shinji had succeeded in defeating one of the Carriers, but another soon joined him. He'd seen this coming.

Another Sandalphon Carrier.

He kept it in his sights. "Toji, what's going on at your end?!"

But then he remembered. The Babel effect prevented him from communicating with anyone on the Earth's crust.

Shinji had expected to engage Armaros soon after landing on the island.

If nothing else, my heartbeat should've called it here. I can't be sitting around under the Earth's crust like this. I have to get back to the surface.

He had to return so he could attract the black giant.

"But can I fight Horaki-san?"

He heard a knocking. A knocking that came from the entry plug's hatch.

Eva-01 Final Model was currently under Yomotsu Hirasaka. As such, it was impossible for anyone to access his hatch.

"Open center hatch," Shinji whispered, remaining alert. The virtual display above him disappeared. The ceiling slid back, replaced by fluorescent ceiling lights hanging from fireproof tiles.

The noisy classroom.

That answers that question.

Shinji couldn't exist outside of the Eva's dream. The classroom was his only link with reality.

"Ikari-kun? Where are you right now?" Rei Trois asked. He could see her black hair, corrupted by the Q.R. Signum, but he couldn't afford to look at her just now.

"Under Yomotsu Hirasaka. Fighting a Carrier that just fell into a lava pool!"

Final Model removed the Powered 8 railgun from the clamp on his back and replaced it with the Bizen blade. His display warned him that the 8 might not work under these circumstances, but he fired a test shot to see. With a successful bang, the gun told him that it would work just

fine. He lowered his body and approached the bubbling surface of the lava.

Trois remained expressionless, despite being the oldest of the Ayanami Reis. She whispered, to avoid attracting the attention of the other students.

Katsuragi Misato invited the Seelefied Kaji Ryoji.

Memories came back to Shinji. “I thought I saw something when I left Hakone. So it *was* the mutant Eva.”

The mutant Eva-0.0 was piloted by the turncoat Ayanami Rei Quatre. She must have been present as well.

“She seems to be negotiating with him for information. For something…in exchange for the replica Longinus.”

“She’s what…?”

“Will it be all right?” Trois asked, with a rare note of dissatisfaction.

Shinji didn’t have to say anything to make his dissent known.

Part of the lava flow slowly rose, and Shinji fired the 8 at it, sending bursts of molten orange everywhere. But nothing came of it.

They’d gone through hell and back to retrieve the replica Lance of Longinus, which had first been stolen when Asuka fought off a Carrier in Eva-02. Shinji had then found it, and Rei Trois, on the Apple’s Core—the testing grounds for the Human Instrumentality Project—with Rei Quatre’s help.

“To me, the replica Longinus is our most dangerous asset. You also took it back so that Seele wouldn’t get his hands on it.”

“I don’t think Misato will give it up so easily. I think she *might* hand it over to Seele if there was no other way. But if we can’t use it…”

Not that he could go back and take it now if he wanted to.

Is that why she gave us permission to leave? Because things would get complicated if we stayed behind?

“Dammit. To hell with the consequences. I would’ve brought it along with me if I knew this would happen!”

Chairs rattled as the school bell announced the end of a class.

“Thank you, Ikari-kun. I have to go now.”

“Trois?” Shinji glanced at the hatch and found that it had closed. His virtual display returned to the screen.

Is she planning something?

The Lance of Longinus replica. A powerful weapon currently possessed by Nerv Japan. Shinji had thought of bringing it with him, but Misato had stopped him, saying it wouldn’t make sense to bring such a weapon on a classified reconnaissance mission.

“I don’t know if it’s actually going to work against Armaros. Better to leave Hakone with some way of defending itself.”

Perhaps they’d resigned themselves to defeat on their way to the island.

Either way, he’d be fighting Hikari.

<<God knows what effect the actual Longinus would have on Armaros, given how wild this island is.>>

<<But we can’t let them take away the replica. That would be the worst possible scenario.>>

“What? Who’s there?” Shinji looked around the inside of the plug. The voice sounded like…his own. Or at least, it felt like it. “What was that?”

The voices were audible representations of Shinji’s thoughts. He was inside the Tower of Babel, the structure made by the Carriers’ staves. It interrupted communications on the outside, but it had the opposite effect on the inside, where thoughts and energy were transmitted at a rapid rate.

Is it happening again?

Shinji remembered the battle at Novaya Zemlya. The Carriers were stronger inside the tower, but their conversations still proceeded at a linear pace.

A communications boost doesn’t mean anything when I’m alone. But the Carriers are still a lot stronger…

<<They might be disrupting our A.T. Fields.>>

<<And we’re up against Sandalphon, an Angel particularly attuned to volcanoes. This won’t end well.>>

Shinji gasped as he felt the ground shift beneath him. Matarael’s corpse, which Final Model had been standing on, was beginning to

disintegrate. Its body had been splayed out over the circular boulder, its long legs spread in four directions, but the rock was softer than he'd expected. He began to wonder whether it was a rock at all. Either way, the Matarael Carrier was sliding into the red-hot lava with Eva-01 Final Model still on top of it.

Shinji grunted. While the A.T. Field was supposed to protect him from the intense heat, he still felt the liquid fire coming in from all sides. He struggled, grasping for the rocks within his reach. But the boulders were slippery. He couldn't get a good grip on them. To make matters worse, he was now experiencing tunnel vision due to the bright magma around him. The A.I. registered the surrounding curvature and reflection as a hit to the library, and the icon for "Designated Sealed Target" popped up. As his entire body sank into magma, a large oval shape layered itself on top of his display.

"Chronostatic Sphere 70%."

"Wha…?!"

THRUM!

Final Model's heart leaped in his chest.

Why here?!

The magma behind him erupted. All he could do was wait for the Sandalphon Carrier to fall back down.

Immediately, Shinji readied the Powered 8.

Immediately, Shinji evaded.

Immediately, Shinji switched back to his blade.

What flooded his consciousness was more than mere words. The three actions of Final Model overlapped like pictures and then froze. The three Evas conflicted with each other, not only in words but in motion.

"The boundary between thoughts and words isn't the only thing getting blurred. The possibilities… They're overlapping!"

Why had he immediately thought of that?

Was this another effect of the Tower of Babel? Lilith was present on the bridge to the new world. She was the center of the Chronostatic Sphere, the black egg…

The Carrier tackled him as he stood frozen.

“Gah!”

His back slammed into the Chronostatic Sphere.

Blood rushed to his head.

What is this thing doing here?!

<<It’s because this is the elevator to the moon!>> one of his fragmented possibilities said.

Shinji had had a hunch that the black egg would have been relocated to the moon after it disappeared from the old Geofront. And now, here it was, halfway on its journey. Its next stop would be the moon itself.

Final Model, waist deep in magma, pointed the gun with his right hand, while his left hand reached for the sphere behind him.

“Father! Ritsuko-san!” Shinji banged on the surface with his fist.

Lilith had generated the Chronostatic Sphere three years ago at the Battle at Nerv HQ, engulfing dozens of personnel. Commander Ikari Gendo and Dr. Akagi Ritsuko were among those lost to the sphere.

<<Communication and impact shouldn’t get through if it’s made of the same material as the Glass Egg in Hakone.>>

<<I can’t call on Father or Ritsuko-san in that case.>>

“Shut up!” Shinji shouted down his Possibilities.

He’d yet to find closure with his estranged father, even after three years. In fact, he’d forced himself to forget about finding closure. But how could he when time in the sphere had stopped? No one blamed him, and he couldn’t even blame himself. The people inside the sphere had been counted among the dead a long time ago.

That was supposed to be the end of it. The end of his father.

So why was he so troubled by it now?

Because time is moving inside that thing!

<<Maya said that someone worked on Super Eva on the inside to turn him into Final Model.>>

<<Father, Ritsuko-san, they all worked on me, touched me. But I can’t remember a thing.>>

That’s insane!

His father had carved a message into the exterior of his foot, presumably halfway through the remodeling.

< <I observe from the far side of time. > >

Shinji could almost see his smirk.

His heart pulsed like a warning bell. Yet the Chronostatic Sphere remained indifferent. Much like his father.

Final Model continued sinking into the lava. Pain rushed up one of his legs. The Sandalphon Carrier had bitten it.

His vision turned upside down.

The density of the magma here was three times that of water. Theoretically, objects tended to float more easily in heavier liquids. But the Sandalphon Carrier had latched its maw onto the Eva and was dragging him down into the lava.

“Dammit!”

Shots flew from the railgun at his feet. The lava absorbed most of the energy from the bullets, so it was doubtful that any of them had hit Sandalphon.

Final Model’s pulse rang louder than the 8’s shots now. The Eva could sense wavelengths from another planet if the pilot was up to it. But Shinji couldn’t spot the Sandalphon Carrier hidden in the magma, possibly because he was finding it difficult to concentrate. He carried on firing at his legs, risking self-harm, but it seemed to be working. The force clamped on his foot soon faded.

Final Model continued to flail within the pool of magma. Even as his vision dimmed, he could still make out the object of his obsession—the giant black egg looming over him like a shadow.

Magma continued to flow, burning Eva-01 Final Model’s shoulders. The Chronostatic Sphere started moving, slowly rising out of the lava.

“Ooooorgh!”

Final Model spread his wings of light, pushing the black sphere, which was larger than he was, out of the molten pool. His heart raced, and the black disk on his back, the Time Brake, glowed. The four pylons opened and started pushing him out.

“Aaaaargh!”

Shinji screamed with all his might as he stumbled in the magma. With a groan, he lifted the sphere out.

But that was all he could do.

The top of the egg stopped. Something was preventing its movement, aside from the sheer weight of the thing.

“What now?!”

Sandalphon had smacked Final Model as it stood in the lava. He lost his balance and fell. Without any footing, he could no longer hold the Chronostatic Sphere, and the black egg landed upon Final Model, pushing him into the magma.

Final Model reached up to climb the wall of the fissure.

“No!”

The rock face crumbled when he grasped it. All that power, and he could do nothing with it.

“Damn it all!”

An alert sounded from the threat behind him. “Pattern Blue, eight o’ clock.”

Final Model reached for the Bizen and caught a full view of Sandalphon. It was eight times larger than the Eva, about the size of the old Angel Gaghiel.

The Angel Carrier was missing. Perhaps Shinji had managed to destroy its Q.R. Signums when he blindly fired the 8. But it was more likely that the Carrier had simply been crushed under the combined weight of the magma and Sandalphon’s girth. That was what the appearance of Pattern Blue suggested.

I can’t breathe.

Final Model attempted a counterattack, but his branching selves blocked him.

“I won’t fall for it twice!”

Shinji took a deep breath of the LCL, bracing for the Angel’s second attack. His possibilities split again, but they didn’t come into conflict. The three hypothetical Final Models jumped in three different directions, each readying his own Bizen.

The wings of light were more difficult to close than they were to spread. Kaworu had warned him about the difficulty of returning to his human vessel once he flew in Super Eva. Now his wings were sparking like a jet engine. The action was more thrust and less flap.

"Hah!"

Shinji did his best to control it through his breathing. With a flash, the wings of light subsided and then he jumped. The three strikes lopped off both of Sandalphon's arms.

What is this? It's hard to breathe, but I can put out a lot of power…

The giant Angel fell into the lava, its armless body splashing about like a flatfish. Molten orange splattered in all directions. Three blades immediately pursued it, piercing right through its core.

I'm burning up!

And not simply because he was in a high-temperature, high-pressure environment.

Shinji slowly pulled the Bizen out of the Angel's flesh.

"What's happening over there?"

Another Final Model stood in front of him. He pulled the Bizen out of the core, and his body was covered in black outlines. Then the shade disappeared.

"Oh… That's me…"

Shinji felt like he was hearing an alarm clock in his sleep; distant and constant. The warning windows in his plug were wrenching him from his slumber as they detected what was happening to his consciousness. He'd been going to school, but he'd never attended any classes that taught him how to deal with a phase-changing Final Model.

"This is bad," Shinji said, realizing the trouble he was in. He was carrying the world's biggest payload, the peak of the Third Impact's power, and with a lit fuse, no less.

His four pylons were already working overtime to help the Time Brake halt the discharge. His display showed the black void on his back glowing a menacing red. If the brake failed, the Third Impact would resume.

"Eva-01 Final Model to Hakone command!" he shouted at his console, despite the futility of it.

“Aaaargh!”

Shinji calmed himself. He was out of breath.

Why… Why am I more worried about Father than my friends and the world?

Ikari Gendo was a stubborn man. Shinji denied any similarity between him and his father any time someone pointed one out.

We’re not alike at all. We’re complete opposites.

He remembered his father when he spoke to Ayanami.

That was the second Ayanami. But now…

An image of Rei Trois flashed into his mind.

“Ah…”

“You have to face your father.” *That’s what Misato-san would say.*

Shinji felt this was inevitable, the way things were going.

I have to see Father.

And that was why he couldn’t let it all end here.

The peak of the Third Impact’s power. He couldn’t just open the lid like a boiling kettle. He had to figure out how to direct the energy.

Which can only mean one thing.

“I have to gather the energy—in my right hand—before it runs out of my body!”

Ayanami Rei Trois had previously decided to travel into space as a sniper. Shinji had escorted her into orbit himself. Upon reactivation, Eva-0.0 had photonized the excess power of the exterior S^2 engine and ejected it from the Eva.

Now, get out! Shinji said this to himself, underlining his intent. Again, the possibilities branched. Two more Final Models walked out of Final Model.

<<I’m holding a weapon in my right hand. I’ll use my left hand!>>

<<There’s so much power. I’ll need both hands!>>

The possible futures are being realized in this prologue to the new myth.

“Don’t screw this up, Shinji!”

It was the first time he'd been so assertive with himself. The two Final Models turned to look at him.

<<So that's how it is,>> said one of the possibilities.

<<No time for second guessing now,>> said another.

The possibilities should have returned to him, since he'd decided they were mere possibilities. "But…"

<<But even if it's a long shot…I'd like to see it.>>

<<Only one way to find out.>>

The three Final Models formed a circle before he could explode. They put their right hands on top of each other. The concentrated light from the impact felt dense and heavy, pulling their arms down under the weight. The three Evas fell to their knees, their shoulder pylons scraping against each other.

All the possibilities lifted their hands in unison.

"Wooooooaaaaargh!"

He couldn't fall now. He still had to confront Hikari/Armaros. Then they would all return to Hakone together. He would talk to his father in his own words. He couldn't fall. Not now!

"I don't know what I am!"

<<I don't know what this world will become!>>

<<I don't know what my place will be!>>

The three Final Models came together, lifting their shining right hands to the sky.

Hear me!

Meanwhile, on the surface of Yomotsu Hirasaka Island…

"Whoa!" Toji saw the exact moment the soapy membrane of the Tower of Babel broke. A pillar of light shot into the sky. The beam kept getting longer and longer.

"Wh-what?!"

Under the Earth, a gigantic arm of light reeled, as if throwing a javelin.

"Whoooooaaa!"

“Keep it down, Suzuhara!”

“I mean, look at that thing!”

The arm of the giant of light. The very arm that had carried Yomotsu Hirasaka to Earth. The arm flung the spear at the spatial lens in orbit.

Kaworu’s voice whispered in Shinji’s ear.

That was a lance you actualized using the limits of your consciousness. No weapon. No myth. The lance of philosophy. The Lance of Lucretius. The Impactor will demand full disclosure, because you’ve struck at the placenta of the new world. I can’t wait to see how the world reacts to this.

Countless crystal fragments sparkled across the sky. The original Lance of Longinus orbited the globe at an altitude of twenty thousand kilometers. Now, the spatial lens, presumed to be a field distortion situated at a similar height, shattered like glass upon the spear of light’s impact.

The spear turned a metallic gold as it passed through the lens, grazing the moon before speeding away.

The great pillar of seawater rushing from the coast of Yomotsu Hirasaka lost its momentum and collapsed.

Victorious, Eva-01 Final Model had reverted to its original state and was now clinging to the edge of the gaping fissure.

PART 4

NEON GENESIS

HIKARI / ARMAROS

EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 25:
Retribution

THE LANCE OF LONGINUS behaved like it had in North Africa, as if someone had incurred its wrath. The lance descended from its altitude, tip first. Its current length was 305,000 kilometers, almost forming a perfect ring. Now, it did a violent, ninety-degree turn, coming straight down on Yomotsu Hirasaka Island.

"The Lance of Longinus changed its trajectory?!"

It happened right after Misato received word of an unknown force destroying the spatial lens.

That was cause enough for celebration, but fear quickly followed. The lance would now punish the one responsible, and the Earth right along with them!

Was it Shinji? He was the first person Misato had thought of when she heard the news. *How?!*

She glanced at the enemy—the enemy she herself had invited—Seele.

"The lens should be impervious to physical attacks. They would be ionized and reconstituted on the other side of it. So how…?" Kaji furrowed his eyebrows.

"This is quite a predicament. Perhaps we could discuss it in the command center rather than here."

The Lance of Longinus came down upon Shinji like divine retribution.

<<Above you!>>

<<The lance is coming!>>

Toji and Asuka shouted at Shinji, who'd managed to climb out of the deep fissure.

Eva-01 Final Model looked overhead, still unsure as to what was going on.

A chill ran down his spine. Shinji remembered his last encounter with the lance. It had traveled at a blinding speed of ninety kilometers per second. By the time he saw it, the thing had gone right through him.

"Aaah!"

He remembered North Africa, how the Lance of Longinus had gouged Super Eva's heart right out of his chest. His hairs stood on end.

What do I do?!

There was no escaping the absurd weapon and its ability to alter its path at will.

The giant flinched from uncontainable fear.

CRASH!

It was as if the world itself shook.

Ten seconds. Twenty seconds. Thirty seconds passed. They felt like an eternity.

"What…happened…?"

Final Model had raised his hands to cover his face. Now he peeked through the gaps in his fingers.

An unsettling silence.

<<Kzzzt—This is Hakone command to Final Model.>> Hyuga's voice streamed into Shinji's ears as he gazed at the sky.

<<The Lance of Longinus has stopped, ten thousand kilometers over Yomotsu Hirasaka. I repeat, the Lance of Longinus has stopped.>>

"Phew…" The twin-pronged lance had never stopped, not since Armaros had thrown it from the surface of the moon. It had run right through Ayanami Rei Cinque in orbit. It had pierced Shinji's heart in North Africa. It had flown from the South Pacific to the archipelago like the wire of God.

The Lance of Longinus had no regard for the hopes of humanity. And now, it had stopped.

"Heh heh…" The corners of Shinji's lips softened as the beginning of an awkward laugh formed.

“Heh heh heh… Ah ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha!”

<<Shinji?>>

<<You okay, bud?>>

Shinji kept laughing until he choked and started coughing. He was wheezing in the LCL now. It was a strange feeling. But he finally felt like he was on the scoreboard. For the first time, he saw the overwhelming force of the enemy being thwarted.

“You can’t bring the lance down on me even after I destroyed the lens. This island is too valuable.”

<<There’s an Ark here,>> Asuka said.

“And I saw the Chronostatic Sphere deep in the Earth. I think Lilith’s still in there.”

Along with Father and all the rest…

They were both objects impervious to physical damage. Their presence on this island meant that it would be the start of the new creation. The command center buzzed as they talked about their observations like one might talk about the weather. With communications reestablished, Final Model, Platypus-2, and Hakone could finally compare notes.

Hyuga studied the underground vertical space and whispered to Aoba. “That fissure looks like a cannon. Do you think they’re trying to use the pressure to launch the sphere from our side?”

“Launch it to the moon? The new world?”

“Yeah. There’s another Ark on the moon, and I don’t think it can move there by itself. Probably the switch from Earth to moon would be complete with the addition of Lilith’s Sphere. If we could prevent it somehow…”

<<Shinji-kun, what did you do?!>> Maya’s voice.

I threw something… But what?

“I… I threw a spear.” Kaworu had said that much.

“I was stuck in an underground magma pool…and my hand grabbed the spear. I threw it at the sky, thinking it was made of lava. I think Kaworu called it the Lance of Lucresomething…”

<<That’s it! That was the thing that shot through the tower and

shattered the spatial lens!>> Toji cut into their conversation excitedly.

Maya proceeded to tell Shinji the cost of his actions. <<It's your telemetry reading. It suddenly dipped by 0.13 seconds!>>

<<Wha…?! Shinji, you moron!>>

<<Listen to me!>> Maya said. <<You just used sixteen percent of the Third Impact's power—of your remaining life.>>

Shinji didn't answer.

I already saw everything she's saying on the warning windows.

<<Detecting movement on the ground. Lots of it.>> Asuka said, the sense of urgency returning to her.

"Are they the blackish creatures we heard about?"

<<No. They're all of uniform shape and rock solid. Match found on database. They're Q.R. Signums!>>

<<To the north of you, Shinji! And to the south, too!>>

The JSSDF Akashima's icon lit up on the comms display.

<<Nerv, black plates—Q.R. Signums—are covering the ground to the south!>>

There was a beeping sound to the right. The North American Alliance was calling in now. There were still survivors on the ground. They'd engaged with the Angel Carriers and were requesting pickup and air support.

<<We have survivors! The Akashima will go back them up.>>

"He's coming," Asuka said.

"Yeah, that's why we're here. Shinji's in a good spot to put a stop to this damned creation myth."

Armaros was coming. They'd rushed to the island, defying orders, specifically to confront him. To confront her. The pilot of the Euro Eva, Hikari, who'd been transformed into the black giant after defeating him.

The scales gathered on a steep rocky mountain at the center of the island whose peak was taller than Everest. Toji and Asuka went higher in their Platypus-2 to get a better look.

"So, Suzuhara, what are you gonna do when you see Hikari?"

"Well… First of all—"

Asuka looked at Toji as he stopped himself mid-sentence. She'd always thought he was dumb, but his was the type of dumb that was fool enough to come up with a plan. This time, however, he wasn't prepared.

"Suzuhara?"

"Shh. Wait… What—" Toji stiffened, twitching. "Sh-shut up! Go away!"

Asuka's skin crawled when she heard him scream.

<<What's going on, Asuka?!>> Shinji picked up on her distress from inside Final Model.

"It's Suzuhara. He's acting weird!"

Toji returned to himself upon hearing his name. "You… You didn't hear that just now? This is bad. Real bad. Soryu, take over the controls!"

"I-I can't. I don't know how!"

The jet began slanting to the side. Toji did his best to stabilize it with the control stick, but he looked as if he was suppressing his right hand with his left. For some reason, he had more control of his cybernetic hand. He raised his head with grim realization.

"Is this…your voice? I want to be wrong…but I know I'm not…"

"You're not saying…?"

Both Toji and Asuka had observed this exact situation before. It was what happened to the Ayanamis when they acted as the black giant's puppets.

"It's Hikari's voice…" Toji said.

But Asuka didn't understand.

"Can't you hear it? This Armaros is talking with *Hikari's* voice."

Chapter 26:
Ayanami

<< I can't stand just sitting around all day. >>

"Huh?" Back in Hakone, Ayanami Rei Trois turned in the direction of the voice. "Quatre? How did you get in?"

Quatre had arrived with Kaji. She'd last been seen on the top deck, on top of her mutant Eva. Had she snuck into the base somehow?

<<Security isn't exactly pristine here.>>

<<Did someone say all-you-can-eat pralines?! Where?>> Six's voice joined in.

"Wait…" Trois said. "Our mental mirroring is reestablished."

The link between the Ayanamis had been broken ever since Rei Quatre took a Q.R. Signum into her Eva.

<<So it has.>>

<<How'd that happen?>>

She could hear their voices the way she could feel the sun after the clouds had gone away. Had they finally been released from Armaros' clutches? But that couldn't be. Quatre's mutant Eva still

had an active Q.R. Signum inside it, and the corruption left behind remained on Quatre's and Trois' bodies.

But how to explain this?

"Listen up, us," Trois started. "No, that's not right," she corrected herself. "Quatre, Six, let's talk with Trois."

Chapter 27:
A New Mouthpiece

Asuka sent an emergency broadcast. “Mayday! Pilot has lost consciousness, and we’re losing control! Shinji! Hakone command!”

<<Hakone command to Platypus-2! Switch to UAV mode! The A.I. should be able to take care of it!>>

<<Uhhh…>> Asuka looked around at the panels. Toji was still struggling, but he could control his mechanical arm enough to flip open the control panel.

“That which must not be… I got it!”

“Asuka, what’s happening?!” Shinji asked.

Final Model turned to Platypus-2, and that was when he saw the mountains move, like an optical illusion.

“Giant beast sighted! It’s coming this way! Why now?!” But it was no accident that the beast had picked this moment to appear.

It headed in the direction of the gathering Q.R. Signum. The assistant combat A.I. identified the threat, but it was too large to get a reading.

<<Acting Deputy! I think Suzuhara’s picking up the black giant’s thoughts… But why?! Why isn’t Armaros speaking through the Reis?!>>

It was because Armaros’ spirit had changed.

The half-mechanical half-organic beast shook earth and air as it approached. It paid no attention to Final Model or the demon-possessed Platypus-2.

“Is it going after the Q.R. Signums?”

Toji and Asuka’s jet stabilized from its tailspin. Now they were looking for a landing zone.

<<Dammit, you knocked me on the head!>>

<<You’ll be fine. We’re okay now. This thing should be able to take us down safely. But *that* thing… It’s crying.>>

Final Model stopped in midair after being reassured of their safety. He now saw countless animals of all shapes and sizes running after the giant beast. The creatures moved with an unnatural speed. Their bodies weren't even built to go that fast. Perhaps these were the creatures the Akashima had seen, the humans who'd lost their form after being overwhelmed by the Ark's life-form data.

"What?!"

They jumped *into* the giant body like it was a pool, melting into it.

The beast swelled as it absorbed each and every creature. Its claws raked the earth over and over, scattering broken fragments of Q.R. Signums everywhere. It was as if it was trying to prevent itself from absorbing them. But all across the animal's gigantic body, the black scales stood erect. It lifted its newly formed arm like a weapon, and the body of the new black giant appeared at last.

"Eva-01 Final Model to Hakone command. Armaros sighted. E4, twenty seconds, sixty percent of tentative map. Subject armed with… Is that a trombone? It looks like a musical instrument…"

<<That's the positron rifle.>> Euro Eva Heurtebise's rifle had been transformed in both shape and size.

The Platypus-2 found a relatively flat piece of ground, and it shifted into landing gear and began its descent upon the soft moss. On the other side of the hill, the giant beast was attacking Armaros. Flames blew out of the black giant's instrument.

On this strange island, their adversary now faced a representative of all non-human species.

Chapter 28:
Wrath of the Beast

THE AMALGAMATED GIANT BEAST, upon whose forehead Eva-02 lay buried, dodged Armaros' opening salvo. The shot hit the hill behind it, and the earth rumbled from the impact. But the beast's size proved to be a disadvantage as the next antiproton blast hit it a few seconds later. Antimatter reactions wracked its mountain-like body, but the beast charged at the black giant and sank its vengeful fangs into his shoulder.

Another gunshot blared.

"The trumpet is sounded," the Kaji-vessel whispered as he saw the image on the screen.

Asuka struggled to get Toji out of his harness.

"Urgh… Humans are supposed to rule…over the beasts of the earth…"

"Yeah, yeah, we get it. Hang in there, now. We're just getting started."

"I know… Dammit! It's the same thing that happened with the U.S. Eva. Why is he so hostile toward non-human creatures?"
Toji forced himself up through his convulsions. "Answer me, Hikari."

<<Those without will are doomed to obey.>>

The giant beast stared in disbelief at the hole in its chest. It looked like it was crumbling.

"Birds?!"

But in fact, it had dissolved into a flock of birds. Strangely, Eva-02 had disappeared along with it. Was it, too, transformed?

Kaji spoke with Seele's knowledge. "They are only animals in the end, nothing but concentrated matter. Even if they could become the soil of the Human Instrumentality Project, they cannot climb the steps and be its bearers."

Misato stood silent next to him, not sure what to make of his statement.

The Kaji-vessel concluded, “But it would be a different story if they got their hands on a core.”

As the flock flew away. Asuka saw a small white figure run into the forest, as if giving chase.

“Wait…Mari?!”

Asuka put her hands on the throttle of the idling Platypus-2. She clicked her tongue, “Ugh! I would’ve learned how to fly this thing if I knew this would happen!” She started rifling through the equipment to see if there was anything she could use.

“Mari… Mari what…?” Toji said, looking at her.

Asuka slapped his leg. “You pick now, of all times, to be useless?!”

She opened the cockpit.

<<Ikari-kun…>>

Shinji could hear it now. “Vice Rep…”

Hikari’s voice.

Final Model confronted the Armaros as birds flew off on either side of him.

“Horaki-san… Can you hear me?”

There was a time when he’d called her “Class Rep” and “Vice Rep,” and even “Hikari-chan.” But “Horaki-san” was how he’d referred to her ever since they’d entered high school. The pitch-black positron rifle gleamed in her hand like a brass instrument. He hoped against hope that she wouldn’t point it at him, but that was out of the question. Shinji had rebelled by breaking the lens in the sky, and now Armaros had come to dispose of him.

It’s not impossible. If it were, I wouldn’t have bothered coming here.

<<I can hear you…feel you.>>

“How about you get out of that thing, and we can all go back to

Tokyo-3 together?"

<<I can't…>>

"Why—"

But the black giant pointed her gun at him before he could finish.

"Dammit!"

The positron rifle flashed. He managed to erect an A.T. Field, Bizen still in hand, to repel it. But the knockback proved too great, and Final Model tumbled from the impact. Armaros closed the distance within those few steps. She swung the stock of her glowing rifle right past Bizen and into Final Model's throat.

WHACK!

It knocked all 3,500 tons of him into the air.

"Gah!"

The force felt like it would stop his breathing.

Maybe I don't even need to breathe, since I only exist in an Eva's dream.

But the pain rattled his mind.

No! If I don't fight her, I'm going to lose.

"Not that I wanna win, either!"

The body of the Euro Eva was close to two times its original size now. Perhaps this happened to everything possessed by Armaros.

Final model crashed into an idyllic forest. Shinji felt the incoming shot before he could see it. He spread his wings of light just enough to nudge him away from the positron rifle's gamma-ray burst.

Toji realized that Asuka had left him alone after they'd landed. He roused himself, opening the throttle.

<<Stop it, Hikari!>>

The Platypus-2 flew again with a roar of its graviton floaters.

<<I killed them… Destroyed them… Destroyed! Destroyed!>>

Armaros' rifle had gained a bayonet, and it was now carving a circle into the ground. Chunks of earth flew all around, several of them hitting the jet's shields.

< <You didn't intend to! > >

< <But I carried it out with these hands! > >

Now linked to Armaros, Toji needed no words to understand the reality of Hikari's situation.

< <I can feel the pain of everything I destroyed, the deaths of everyone I killed! I can feel it flow through my arms! > >

"Urgh!"

< <Help me, Toji! > >

The sight was beyond description. Human lives ended as quickly as their bodies scattered. A major city was leveled in an instant. He didn't know how to save her after being confronted with such a vision. For an instant, the stage went still.

And then…

THRUM!

THRUM!

Final Model's heart, Shinji's heart, pulsed from deep within the mountain ridge.

< <I must stop…that noise. > > Hikari's voice was monotone.

"Why?! That's Shinji's heart!"

< <You're getting too close, Toji! > > Shinji shouted from the shadow of the rock.

He's trying to distract me by making me focus on Horaki!

< <With time…humanity will have no need for words or thoughts as a basis for their actions. They shall have something purer. > >

"What are you talking about?!"

No one knew where Armaros started and Hikari ended. The words belonged to Hikari, and with her superior vocabulary, she could convey things the Ayanamis couldn't.

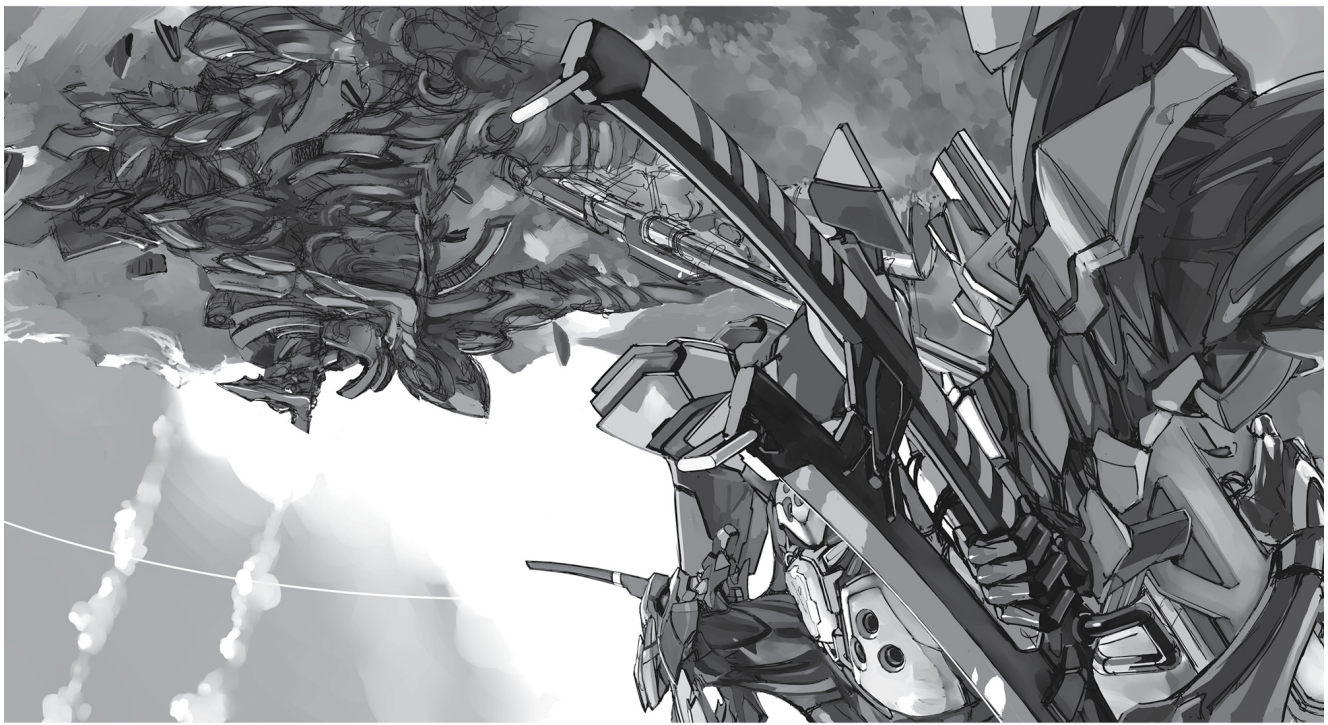
< <In a word, it's the pulse. The rhythm that misleads life. > >

Toji blocked Armaros' path. The black giant suddenly crumbled, melting into the ground. Countless Q.R. Signums slipped right under the Platypus-2.

“No! She’s going your way, Shinji!”

Shinji saw the first hints of Q.R. Signum form out of the rock he was hiding behind and backed away. But it was too late. An arm protruded from the pool of black scales, caught him, and knocked him to the ground.

The rest of Armaros’ body emerged from the rocks, which had acted as her shield. She shoved the bayonet of the positron toward his heart, where the Center Trigonus was located.



Armaros' body ■ emerged from the rocks.

<< That is why I must erase your pulse! >>

Shinji grabbed the barrel, redirecting the fatal shot. The bullet exploded into the ground behind Final Model, and he took advantage of the blast to tackle Armaros.

Unfortunately, the black giant was already sinking back into the rock wall. Hikari's voice echoed over the broken valley.

<< Humanity will continue to hope as long as that thing exists! It will continue to connect the rhythm of life! We cannot proceed to the new stage! >>

The sound reverberated through the mountain.

"Why can't I detect the effect?!"

The barrel of the rifle caught Shinji off guard as it swept his feet out from under him.

<< We cannot proceed if the Human Instrumentality Project is not brought to completion, no matter how many times we repeat this world! >>

Shinji activated his wings in panic. Hikari would know to go after his feet. He remembered the struggle against this strategy of hers back in Hokkaido. He'd hoped to cross the Armaros bridge when she got here, but that ship had long since sailed.

"That's enough!"

Toji couldn't argue with Hikari when her thoughts were being transmitted directly into his brain. He was talking to her now, not through telepathy but through the Novaya Zemlya communications protocol.

"Let's talk about this, Hikari!"

<< Why? >>

He heard Hikari's voice as she fired at Eva-01 Final Model in the sky.

"Why?"

<< I don't need words to talk with you anymore, Toji. See? I can communicate with you just fine. >>

Toji felt unsettled, as if a giant eye was looking at him. The mind

link would've made him lose consciousness again had he not been prepared for it. He gasped, realizing that his plane was going down. The balance needle of its graviton floaters screeched as if under heavy stress.

I'm under attack? No!

<<Toji!>> Shinji sent him an image of the Platypus-2 through Final Model's eyes. <<Abandon ship! Eject now!>>

"What?!"

A band of polished black light stretched up from the ground to engulf the Platypus-2. Now it seemed as if the jet was sprouting arms of its own. Arms that looked like they belonged to a hollow suit of armor.

Shinji screamed. <<That's a Torwächter arm! You're being turned into one of her eternal servants!>>

The positron cannon hanging from the Platypus-2 switched to its photon excitation mode and turned. A blinding beam of light fired at the arm, amputating the grotesque growth. The arm fell to the ground with a loud thud, and Toji's jet shot up like a bullet.

What the hell was that?!

The whole thing felt like an illusion, but the wing cameras showed the stump of an arm still squirming.

<<Come with me, Toji.>> Shinji and the others were probably watching and wondering how another Torwächter had come into existence.

"Now, hang on…" He suddenly felt terrified of Hikari.

<<I can take you with me as a memory if you don't want to.>> Which was a poetic way of saying she'd kill him.

Still, Toji couldn't agree. The chain of supernatural phenomena was supposed to break him, but it only ended up motivating him. He knew that Hikari wasn't the one talking right now. He took the Platypus-2 and charged.

<<Get away from there, Toji! She's baiting you!>>

He ignored Shinji's pleas.

Toji's jet avoided the tip of Armaros' positron bayonet with a sudden drop of altitude brought on by a deliberate deactivation of the VTOL's floaters. He didn't think Hikari was responsible for all the

horrors Armaros had committed.

Armaros pointed her gun at the Platypus-2 and fired. The repulsor field generated by the N_2 reactor deflected the shot, but the fuselage rolled violently from the explosion. Toji's prosthetic leg smacked against his chin, and he immediately felt woozy.

Crap…

His surroundings brightened as he felt himself fading away. Final Model had deployed his wings of light and dashed in between the black giant and the plane before Armaros could get another shot in. A dust cloud exploded behind the Eva as the shock wave finally caught up to him.

"You need to cut your neural feedback link when you get cut like that. You might end up crippled otherwise!"

Shinji was shouting. Bizen's slanted blade was still sheathed in the field. He brandished his pommel at Armaros.

"Sorry, Vice Rep! I'm carving the entry unit out of that body and taking you home!"

Chapter 29:
Mari

ASUKA HAD DEPLANED the Platypus-2 and was speeding away from it on the dirt bike Toji had loaded into the cargo section. It was the same bike Toji had used in Hokkaido as Nerv's attaché, when he'd gone up and down the northern mountains in search of Euro Rapid Response soldiers who'd crash there. The bike was as battered as the heavy VTOL that carried it.

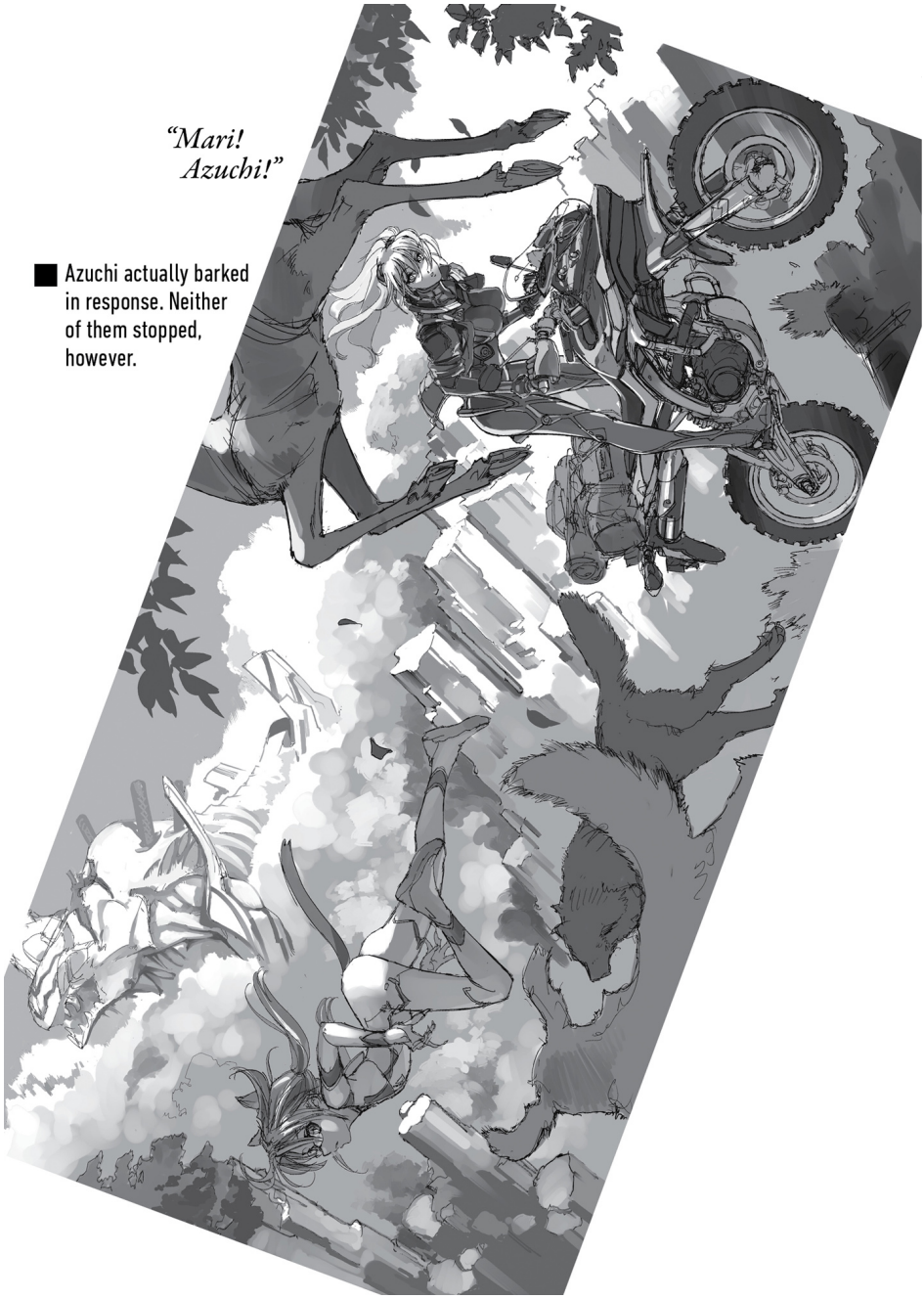
She was getting used to driving around the uneven terrain, but without a destination, she was still wasting time. Could she really catch up with Mari?

I should've given this some thought…

Meanwhile, the birds that had flown north changed course, passing by her overhead. Asuka dropped her eyes back to the road…and saw Mari and a golden retriever. They were still following the flock.

"Mari! Azuchi!"

Mari gave her a passing glance, but Azuchi actually barked in response. Neither of them stopped, however.



■ Azuchi actually barked in response. Neither of them stopped, however.

“Hey, wait up!”

As Asuka turned her bike around, a pack of animals appeared, following Mari and Azuchi. They ran past her, down a steep cliff without flinching.

“You’re kidding…”

Asuka looked ahead at the forest Mari was running toward, at the foggy valley the birds had disappeared into. As she watched, the giant beast reappeared out of the mist. It let out a sky-piercing howl.

As she felt the pressure it gave off, Asuka understood.

That enormous thing is what Wolfpack became!

Asuka cranked the accelerator. There was no need for second guesses now.

“Shinji! Tell Hakone command that I’ve found Mari. I can’t get to them from my end. She’s wearing Six’s plugsuit, so I can track her with her IFF tag as long as I’m close enough.”

<<Asuka, you’re not with Toji?!>>

“I’m in my plugsuit, too. Tell them to track my signal if it comes to that.”

She let go of the transmit button. Mari was in sight now.

“Come on, Mari, we almost killed each other! The least we can do is talk.”

What had happened between them was ridiculous. At the time, Asuka had been synthesized with her Eva, along with thousands of other life-forms. The Asuka/Eva synthesis had become Mari’s ideal, and in the end, the U.S. Eva had devoured her.

The match was supposed to end with Mari victorious, but both of them had been ionized by the spatial lens as it transported matter to Yomotsu Hirasaka. When they were reconstituted at the focal point closest to the Earth, all traces of their Evas and other life-forms were gone. They had reverted to ordinary girls.

“We weren’t the only ones reconstituted over Yomotsu Hirasaka. Unit Two and Wolfpack got the same treatment elsewhere.”

It didn’t sit well with her that her reversion had basically been a shipping accident.

But why is Wolfpack so huge?

“Hey!” Asuka spoke to Mari directly. “You don’t think it got huge because the lens lost focus, do you?!”

“There’s a box with countless life-forms on this island,” Mari said.

The Ark.

“Those lives continued to exist despite being locked away, and they’ve built up a lot of rage. The beast only took that into itself. The same goes for the life-forms you had in you, Asuka, and all the birds in the sky.”

“Rage?”

The rage of being locked away in the Ark indefinitely, over countless cycles of worlds…an eternity.

“You couldn’t keep your hands off me when you were reconstituted. You cried like a lost child. Now you won’t even bother looking at me.”

Which means she has somewhere she needs to be.

“I have to go home to it, give it a reason other than rage. I can’t go back to being human or Eva.”

Mari punctuated her statement with a howl. The other animals howled with her. In the distance, a loud roar rumbled through the air.

Although Asuka couldn’t really understand Mari’s perspective, their destination was the same.

“I know what I’m going to do when *I* get there. I’m going to rip Unit Two out of your pack.”

Chapter 30:
Classroom

Tokyo-3.

Rei Quatre, bored of waiting for Seele/Kaji/Kaji, got off the mutant Eva that was parked on the top deck of HQ and made her way to Sengokuhara High School. This would be the second time Quatre had been to the school layered under Shinji's dream. She'd been far away last time and only went to school when she was asleep. Now she broadcast her intentions over the Ayanami mental mirroring.

<<I think I'll walk today.>>

For once, Rei Trois wasn't under troublesome security surveillance, so she told Quatre how to get there.

"Well then…"

Quatre and Six had accepted Trois' invitation to talk. All she could do now was wait.

The school was restless as it entered break time. Turncoat Quatre looked very similar to Trois, so she'd passed unnoticed. But the seat behind her shuffled suddenly. This was what drew the class's attention.

She turned around. "Suzuhara-kun? I thought you were supposed to be at Yomotsu Hirasaka."

Toji's figure was hazy.

"This is…the classroom. I'm still in the middle of a fight."

"You know this classroom is Ikari-kun's dream, don't you? It pulls the consciousness of his classmates into itself. You have to go back. You might lose your physical body."

Quatre smirked, pressing her hand on Toji's chest like she was about to push him. The hustle and bustle of their classmates continued unabated.

"You're…Quatre? Ayanami Quatre…I need a favor."

"I'm getting a lot of requests today."

He whispered something into her ear, and then he was gone.

Toji awoke in the cockpit of the Platypus-2. He didn't have to shake himself awake. The turbulent roll had already done the job for him. He reversed the graviton thrusters on the other side of the rudder to reposition the craft.

"Dammit!"

The tailspin stopped after the A.I. kicked in. He'd managed to avoid a direct hit, but the shock wave clipped part of his left wing. A plane that operated solely on aerodynamics would've crashed by now.

<<Toji!>> Shinji shouted frantically.

"I'm fine! But Shinji…!"

<<What?>>

"Please, save Hikari!"

Chapter 31:
Skeleton Key

THINGS WERE HEATING UP in Tokyo-3.

"Stop it! What do you think you're doing?!"

Normally, Seele/Kaji/Kaji could keep Quatre's mutant Eva in check.

"You don't expect me to just sit here and negotiate."

But now the mutant Eva was running amok in HQ.

"She can take the Longinus replica herself if she knows where to look."

"Is this your idea of a negotiation?!"

Guns surrounded Kaji in the cafeteria as Quatre had her field day.

"We haven't even begun negotiating. Either way, I have nothing to do with this. I can no longer control the black scale. If you have any complaints, direct it to the puppet!"

Quatre's Eva jumped down the hole in the center of the top deck, surrounded by anti-air units pointed at her. She plummeted past the dome of the sarcophagus that contained the old Geofront and broke through the underground complex with her halberd.

"Southeast containment unit six." Fuyutsuki started directing the command center as he read the status board. "Unit Zero, Trois. Prepare for combat in enclosed space. Proceed to containment unit six via routes three through six."

"This is Trois. Acknowledged."

The earth shook through the earthquake-proof structure. An underground explosion.

"Quatre's Mutant Eva has arrived at Containment Unit Six!"

"Drown her in fast-acting bakelite as soon as she breaks through! That mutant can teleport whenever she wants."

Hyuga relayed corrections to Trois, who was rushing to the scene.

“Command to Trois. You seem to be stopping above route six. Everything okay there?”

Trois wasn’t on the sixth track of the linear transport rail. She was walking along the track of route three. A secret cargo train approached her, one that wasn’t in the diagram of the higher-ups. She forced it to stop with her Eva. The car went off the tracks. The heavy refrigerated box it was transporting broke open, releasing cold vapor. Trois reached in and found what she was looking for. The replica of the Lance of Longinus vibrated in her hands.

“They transported it as soon as you told them where you were going.”

< <You could make it as a thief. Granted, you’re not as talented as I am. > >

Quatre smirked perversely over the mental mirroring. Trois had leaked the lance’s location to Quatre, since she wanted to smoke it out. Her plan had gone off without a hitch. Quatre’s mutant Eva escaped from the foot of Mount Kamiyama under the fire of heavy artillery. She spread her black wings and flew over the caldera.

< <That was excellent, Trois. But what now? And what about the small one? > >

< <Aaaaah! I—can’t—hear—yooooooou! I didn’t see anything, either! > >

The Eva-0.0 Type-F Allegorica proceeded to the Komagatake sniping post at a deliberately leisurely pace.

“Ikari-kun and the others are fighting right now. This might be the skeleton key to either make or break the world. I will not let it be used as a bargaining chip for Seele.”

In the end, Trois’ Eva-0.0 couldn’t escape the Hakone caldera. She took the Lance of Longinus replica and ran to the Glass Egg that hovered over the shores of Lake Ashi. The impervious object had once been the shell of Lilith’s Chronostatic Sphere in Central Dogma.

And so, Trois barricaded herself inside it.

PART 5

NEON GENESIS

WORLD TREE

EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 32:
Fortress of Frosted Glass

THE NORTHERN SHORES of Lake Ashi.

The Glass Egg. A 666-meter structure made of matter…or perhaps a power field. Aside from the eighty-meter opening (already present upon discovery), the thing was absolutely impervious to all forms of damage and was on its way to being repurposed as a shelter.

Rei Trois' Eva-0.0 passed by the construction equipment, replica of the Lance of Longinus in hand.

<<Control to Unit Zero. Trois, return to the cage.>>

Despite being in close proximity with HQ, Hyuga's comms sounded distant because of the Glass Egg's electromagnetic shielding capabilities. Usually, Eva-0.0 would be remotely shut down via telemetry. Trois had anticipated this move and disabled the feature before she carried out her plan.

She'd been forced into the Glass Egg like a rat into a corner, but Eva-0.0 could function indefinitely, thanks to its external S^2 engine. HQ knew that Trois would be in trouble were she put under siege conditions.

Fuyutsuki tried talking her out of it. <<Deboard and surrender yourself to the security division immediately. You are guilty of unauthorized operation of an Eva, theft of a highly critical weapon, and destruction of property in the process. Surrender, and we'll let you off with disciplinary action. But should you continue your insubordination while in an Evangelion, you will be charged with treason.>>

But Trois had made up her mind. "You're the ones betraying everybody," she declared through the comm speakers. "Nerv isn't what it used to be when Commander Ikari was around. We no longer have any contact with secret organizations like Seele. Ikari-kun destroyed that era."

Misato heard this exchange in the cafeteria. A data terminal sat on the table, and on the other side sat the Kaji-vessel.

“Don’t you think it’s strange, Kaji-kun?”

“I think it’s a bad joke. I thought you people wanted to negotiate with me.”

“I’d like to know why the Rei you brought with you, Quatre, went crazy earlier. Where is she?”

“I don’t know anything about that puppet’s emotions or motivations.”

Rei Quatre had disappeared, along with her mutant Eva. It felt as if the other two Ayanamis had been drawn into her madness. In any case, none of them seemed likely to follow orders now, be it from Misato or Seele. Misato was sure of one thing, however.

We adults betrayed you. That’s what you think, isn’t it, Trois?

Children had the privilege of charging into situations without planning or approval. Adults had responsibilities to bear. Seele/Kaji had immediately responded to Misato’s outreach. He was still suspicious, but he could be of great use. The more she knew about the rules governing this world, the better. Swallowing her personal feelings was worth the information. Humanity knew next to nothing about the current enemy and impending apocalypse.

Misato hit a key on the terminal. “Let’s talk, Trois.”

She’s been stubborn from the beginning. Actually, I’m not sure she knows how to falter.

“I’m open to your requests, if you have any.”

< <Do not use the Longinus replica as a bargaining chip with Seele. Ikari-kun is still fighting out there. We cannot afford to lose the lance.> >

“Don’t you think I know that?!” Fuyutsuki said sourly to a silenced microphone back in the command center. “Yui would’ve been able to see the whole picture, but this temperamental child copy can only see one side!”

His anger subsided the more he remembered Yui. The woman whose DNA ran through Rei’s veins had been the picture of an idealistic child, which was why she’d volunteered to bury herself in the heart of Eva-01.

Seele/Kaji wanted assurance that he would know the whereabouts of the Longinus replica after the game was over.

“Seele thinks the world is going to end soon, and they don’t particularly care how we use it until then or whether it comes back to them after.”

That was the logic of the higher-ups at Nerv Japan. That was how the lance had ended up as a bargaining chip to begin with. A paltry piece of information to trade compared to whatever the Kaji-vessel could tell them.

“And now that’s called into question.”

The lance’s power couldn’t be used continuously after being thrown.

That was a fact.

A fact that Trois insisted on.

“Where is Seele’s mode of transport now? Where is Rei Quatre’s mutant Eva?”

Hyuga looked at the display, at the quantum flow inclinometer set up in a ring around the caldera.

“She warped in the direction of Gora, but there’s been no sign of her since…”

<<Don’t ruin the watermelon patch.>>

Six whispered into Trois’ mind, concealing their reestablished mental mirroring. The watermelon patch had originally belonged to Kaji and had been passed on to Shinji three years ago, after the Battle at Nerv HQ. It had survived many a disaster. Rei Six had moved it to the Glass Egg.

The egg was impervious to everything from earthquakes to radio waves, from wavelengths to particles. No light should have been able to pierce the shell, leaving the inside of the egg pitch-black, and yet, warm sunlight could somehow penetrate its frosted exterior. The temperature within the egg remained constant, without any need of regulation, as if preserving the mystery of the object. It was the perfect greenhouse. Six had used the Eva-0.0 Type-F Allegorica to relocate it to one of the decks and had been tending to it with her Type-N robots.

<< You have to be real careful with those melons. >>

Six anticipated Trois' answer.

"Hee hee."

<< I didn't know you could laugh, >> Quatre said.

Honestly, it came as a surprise to Trois as well.

Before, the mental mirroring compiled the information gathered by multiple Ayanamis to form a single Ayanami Rei. But now…each brought her own perspective to the table. There was noise now.

<< Noise? >>

<< Like a fizzy glass of soda? >>

Trois' Eva-0.0 stowed the Longinus replica behind her and trained the Powered 8 railgun on the entrance.

<< I repeat, this is Command. Trois, return to the cage immediately. >>

On the other side of the wall, vehicles armed with anti-Angel electromagnetic cannons surrounded the structure. No one had expected a standoff to occur on the shores of Lake Ashi.

Chapter 33:
A Drop in the River

ASUKA WAS TRAILING MARI with her dirt bike on Yomotsu Hirasaka. At times, she saw flashes of light rise over the ridgelines. Shinji's Eva-01 Final Model was locked in combat with Hikari's Armaros. Toji's Platypus-2 was there, too, provided he hadn't crashed yet. Meanwhile, she was still trying to retrieve her weapon. Mari knew where it was and had gone ahead. Somewhere on this island, deep inside this forest, was Mari's Eva, reconstituted as a giant beast by the spatial lens, and upon its forehead, Asuka's Eva-02.

Asuka had followed a strange path so far. She hoped to be reunited with her own Eva at the end of it. That said…

Why am I even doing this?

A good part of her questioned her actions.

Both of them had been exposed to the Ark before. Asuka was protected by the powerful properties of the new orichalcum plugsuit, but she wondered how it was with Mari.

Little Mari was leading her pack. She moved like a cat, climbing up trees and rushing through groves. She didn't saltify, but the effects of the life-form data were becoming apparent. She had ears on top of her head and had sprouted a tail for balance. Her nails turned into claws that gripped and kicked the ground beneath her. She was faster than a child now. Indeed, her current speed was inhuman.

For as long as she could remember, Mari's DNA had been spliced with genes from other animals. She had no sense of self. But she never considered this a disadvantage. If anything, she found the wind that invaded her humanity comforting.

Asuka did her best to follow her on the dirt bike.

The tests run at Hakone said she was wiped of all traces of foreign DNA. What's going on?

<<This is just that kind of place.>>

Asuka turned, recognizing the mysterious voice as belonging to an

Ayanami.

Rei Cinque?!

Deep within the primitive forest, in the shadow of a large fern, the Rei that had disappeared between Earth and moon reappeared. Ayanami Rei Cinque looked more mature than Trois and Quatre, having spent more time in the artificial womb, and it was this Ayanami that Asuka saw.

She immediately slowed the bike, but Cinque pointed her hand at Mari and said, “Go.”

More voices rushed into Asuka’s head.

< <I have to take it back! > >

< <I have to get Unit Two back! I can’t just wait for Shinji to do it. > >

< <Who is that? > >

“Wha?!” she screamed in surprise. The voices in her head all belonged to her. Her wheels nearly slipped. She regained her balance, but by the time she turned back, Cinque was gone.

A hallucination.

Animals of every kind rushed by her to follow Mari. The beasts grew old, faded. Some of them fused into one another as they continued. The pack was in a constant flux.

What kind of place is *this?*

The strange pack mounted the wide, green slope at a great speed. Gas streamed down the middle of the mountainside, but Mari and her Ark life-form data pressed on.

< <It’s like they’re being called up into the sky. > >

< <I’m the only one I’m interested in. > >

< <There must be some hidden meaning to this. > >

My decisions… Are they converging? And with the other lives, too?

The Ark recorded life-forms from all time periods.

This is the umbilical cord that gives birth to the new world. Are the me’s from the other timelines coming together?

“Am I having second thoughts?” Unlike Shinji, she understood

immediately. The steady drone of the engine remained constant. Asuka focused it to anchor herself in reality.

"Azuchi!"

She called the golden retriever out of the pack just as it was beginning to morph. The dog barked in response.

"You're Kasuga-san's pup, aren't you? The one running the Akashima unit? You can't go on mixing with the others. The Akashima's on this island, so your master must be close, too!"

Azuchi barked again. Mari said to Asuka, as if speaking for the dog, "Take care of Azuchi." And with that, she jumped off the ridge and out of Asuka's sight.

"Huh? Wait!"

The pack followed suit. All were sucked into the mist. The gray expanse rippled like a field of wheat in the wind. Overhead and far into the distance, the clanging of restraint armor rang through the air like a carillon.

They'd closed in on it at some point. Closed in on Mari's mountainous Eva, perhaps magnified through an accident involving the spatial lens, or perhaps because it had assumed the Ark's life-forms.

The former U.S. Eva, Wolfpack.

Mari and her pack were finally home. Mari had been a trembling wreck who refused to leave Asuka and Six's side back at Nerv HQ. She couldn't bear being separated from the genes inside of her. They all wanted to save her, wanted to give her a life worthy of a human person, but she just couldn't live that way.

"Azuchi and her sister Momo are together with Nerv U.S.A.'s mobile staff."

Her voice grew softer and softer. These were Mari's last words as a human being.

"Woof!"

The silver waves crashed again, and they melted away into Wolfpack's surface. Asuka would never forget the look on Mari's face until the day she died. It was the first time she saw her smile.

<<How pointless.>>

<<Do you feel left out even after seeing her meet that gruesome

end? > >

“No! I’m just pissed that I saw her go out with a smile! C’mon, Azuchi!”

Asuka revved her rear tire to turn in the direction of the ridgeline. She shifted into a lower gear, accelerating up the narrow hill at full speed. She rushed through the gray gas, past Wolfpack’s curling spine.

“Come on!”

She jumped together with Azuchi, landing on Wolfpack’s back. Not a bad jump for a first try—that’s what Asuka thought, at least.

She felt as if Wolfpack’s armor was closing in around her. She needed to follow its spine and trace it all the way to the head, to where her Eva-02 had been reconstituted.

The giant beast lurched up, and Asuka felt the insides of her stomach churn as the air pressure rose.

Chapter 34:
Eva-02

"Sorry, Suzuhara." Asuka and Azuchi watched as the bike fell off the other side of the giant. She looked to the beast's head and saw Eva-02. While features from its days as the Asuka/Eva synthesis remained, it had regained most of its original design.

In a distant forest over the mountains, rays of light flashed with explosions.

Must be Armaros' positron rifle.

Could Shinji actually fight Hikari?

Fortunately, the beast's quadrupedal movement didn't cause much turbulence to the head.

Will this thing even move? Asuka thought, as they approached Eva-02.

The mechanical parts activated, as if to put her worries to rest. Asuka and Azuchi fell into the ejected entry plug. She looked around and found that the virtual displays were all lit up.

"Hunh. It's on? It's activated?!"

She was shocked. The plug wasn't even inside Eva-02 yet.

Asuka gripped the controller, but it gave no response. The readings on the display didn't make sense to her.

"Okay, what the hell is going on here?"

Azuchi barked, as if prompted by her surprise. The graphs on the screen scattered like a pack of animals.

"I guess the one who tried to eat me is still around."

Was Eva-02 part of Wolfpack now, as its appearance suggested?

Despite being powered up, she didn't feel that unique pressure from the front of the entry plug where the core resided. It emitted no A.T. Field, no barrier of individuality. Instead, it allowed itself to be covered by Wolfpack's superior field without so much as a complaint.

“Seriously?”

<<Asuka…!>> A voice came from the receiver in her arm.

“Shinji? What’s your situation?”

Shinji reported his stalemate. <<I can’t convince Horaki-san to leave Armaros. Sorry, but is Unit Two functional?>>

She didn’t know. But Asuka flared her nostrils and said, “I’ll figure something out.”

Not like we have a choice.

<<All right…>> Shinji answered, understanding the heart of her situation.

Schematic windows opened one after another on her sub display, and she looked for a way to infiltrate through the command line.

“Mari? Can you hear me? Are you satisfied now?” Asuka asked.

Mari had jumped onto the gigantified U.S. Eva and melted right into it. No, it was more appropriate to say that she’d returned to her pack and become one with it.

“You ran away from Hakone and came all the way here to meet this big palooka, didn’t you?”

A pause, and then, <<I can hear you.>>

But this was no audible response. The blinking cursor on the sub display produced a line of text.

<<I’m not satisfied…yet.>>

“Why not?”

<<I can’t be. Not while there’s a big pack around.>>

“You lost me. Look, can you detach this Nerv Japan Eva from you?”

<<I don’t know.>>

“Excuse me? You’re not going to tell me you can’t see it, are you? Because it’s right on your forehead. That joke is tired.”

<<I don’t know where your Eva begins and ends.>>

She doesn’t recognize it as a separate entity because they’ve been synthesized? Or is the life-form data that occupied Unit Two not completely purged yet, and so she can’t tell it apart from Wolfpack because they’re both

amalgams?

Asuka's finger stopped on the reactor output line when she felt Wolfpack turn its head from inside Eva-02. "Sorry, what was that about a big pack?"

Her hairs stood on end.

Scheiße… The Ark is that way.

Azuchi's ears flipped when she heard Eva-02's mechanical sinews tense.

"Unit Two doesn't like it, either. Not after the horrible things it did to us. Mari, that's not a pack!"

Then again, maybe a collection of all terrestrial life-forms could be considered a pack.

A sudden acceleration jolted Asuka out of her musings and into her seat. Azuchi yelped as she slid under the seat toward the back of the plug tube.

"Mari, don't eat that thing!"

Chapter 35:
Longinus

Final Model brought the blade of the Bizen down on Armaros, and she blocked it with her serpent head gauntlet. The two giants were locked in a test of strength, casting their shadows over the forest.

<<The world to come…has been prepared.>>

Shinji didn't know what to do against Hikari/Armaros anymore.

<<There is no reason…for the future of this world.>>

Could he really persuade her to stop?

Asuka's tragic "Probably not" sank into his mind. Could he bring himself to defeat Hikari if it came to it? But even if he were to sacrifice Hikari, the tidings from Hakone weren't exactly optimistic. Shinji and Final Model would simply become the new Armaros in her place. His heart would be consumed by the enemy.

There was no solution.

His head was burning up. He had to come up with a way out of this.

The Platypus-2 fighter jet was still in the air, but Toji had grown quieter and quieter. All the big words they'd said in Hakone before heading out seemed pathetic now.

Never mind that. What am I going to do with Horaki-san?!

<<Nerv Japan Super Eva coded Evangelion, step away from Armaros!>>

A shout came through the open communication frequency several dozens of kilometers out in the ocean.

"Huh?! Who's there?!" Shinji said.

<<Hang on, that's JSSDF code!>>

Before Toji could confirm it, one of Akashima's wingmen—Shrike Two, equipped with the same engine as the Platypus-2—approached them to clarify the warning.

< <Final Model, you have six artillery shells coming your way! Impact in— > >

"Whoa!"

Final Model activated his wings of light and dashed away. Taking advantage of the opening, Armaros pointed her rifle at him, but…

< <Zero! > >

The ground shook as the six rounds kicked up a heavy dust cloud. The explosion covered the entirety of Armaros' giant body, and the shock wave was enough to raze the trees around them.

< <This is the JSSDF *Yamato*. Super Eva—no, Final Model—we have a special delivery from Hakone for you. Freshly air dropped from Ogasawara. > >

Nerv took their spare reactors and refurbished old World War II antiques with them. It was the first time the battleship had fired her six guns loaded with two-ton artillery shells in fifty years. With the exception of ceremonial shellings, of course.

< <Damage report! > >

< <That's crazy! Hikari?! > >

As chaos descended on the communication line, the black giant charged out of the smoke.

Was Armaros unharmed?

No, she was missing her left arm. She threw away the grip still clutched in her right hand.

< <Everyone…is so…mean… > >

The black giant spoke with Hikari's voice. Just as it looked like she was about to tackle Final Model, she crumbled into millions of Q.R. Signums.

"Urgh!"

Final Model pulled his Bizen out of the ground and swiped it left and right. He managed to swat most of the Q.R. Signums away, breaking the black scales with his A.T. Field, especially the ones that were encroaching on his wings of light.

"Dammit!" Shinji barely found purchase. Were the scales warping in and out of existence? He couldn't waste any more time with them. He

looked in the direction of the voice, at the growing storm of Q.R. Signums behind it.

< <Kodama…help me… > >

The words were no mere cry of pain. Q.R. Signums gathered behind her as Final Model rushed her.

Shinji readied the Bizen. But then a large, Eva-sized shadow lumbered out of the artillery smoke. He noticed it too late.

A spindle slammed into Final Model.

"Gah!"

The 3,500-ton Eva tumbled from the sudden impact. He noticed the weapon before it slipped out of his wavering vision.

A sling… No!

The Torwächter weapon.

Armaros had manifested her messenger upon the invocation of her sister's name. The black giant's signature plate had sprouted from her back. It extended into the ground, piercing it. A warp tunnel appeared, and out of it came the hollow suit of armor.

With the addition of this black messenger, Euro Eva's transformation into Armaros was almost complete.

The Torwächter stepped from the smoke.

"An empty suit of armor is no match for me now!"

Final Model was on his knees. He dashed toward Armaros, avoiding another attack from the spindle. Rather than dealing with the Torwächter's weapon, he was better off confronting Armaros head-on.

Final Model used his momentum to propel himself from his awkward position, but Armaros lifted her left arm at him.

Why the broken arm?

Shinji sensed danger. He brought the Bizen up at an angle, deliberately missing his swing and causing Final Model to fall forward. The spiral gauntlet wrapped around Armaros' left arm extended like a serpent, piercing the air where Final Model's head had just been, grazing him.

He knew this sensation.

"Toji! I think that's the evolution of Heurtebise's Field Piercer. The

Devil's Backbone, was it? Six's Eva has something like it!"

The ground broke under the Eva's weight, but he used the wings of light to regain his footing.

"Toji?!"

<<Shinji, she got me.>>

When the fog cleared, he saw that the Platypus-2 fighter jet was done for. A Q.R. Signum had pierced its N_2 reactor, possibly while Armaros had been flying earlier.

<<Dammit! I didn't know Q.R. Signums could drain N_2 reactors!>>

"They can do that?! How…"

<<I've lost all control! I can't eject—>>

"Hang in there, I'm coming!"

Final Model sped through the air, but the next words Shinji heard sealed Toji's fate.

<<Toji…help me…>>

"No! Toji, don't listen to her!"

A black strip extended from the ground as soon as the invocation was uttered. It engulfed the Platypus-2, wringing it like a dirty rag.

"Toji… Aaaargh!"

The black strip emitted the red glow of Q.R. Signum, and it pulsed as it took on a humanoid shape. A slim suit of black armor stood in the place of the Platypus-2, and the black strip became a black plate.

"Hakone command… Toji…is now a Torwächter."

<<Hakone command to Final Model. What?! Say again!>>

"Toji turned into a Torwächter!"

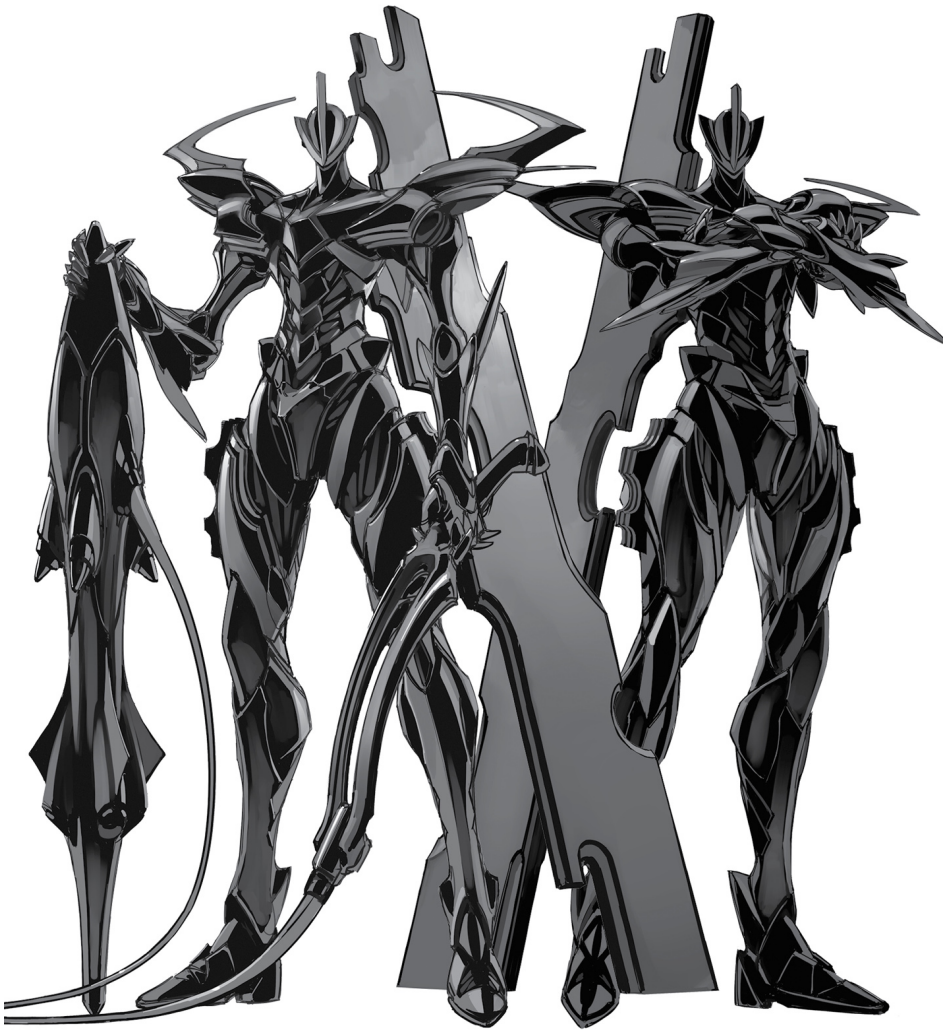
The enemy didn't spare Final Model, who now stood in a daze. The two black messengers, Torwächter Kodama and Torwächter Toji, touched their plates and spread apart, opening a square window between them, which showed recognizable terrain this time. The Ark. And from it crawled six winged Angel Carriers.

The Carriers surrounded Final Model while the Torwächters stepped through the window and were transported elsewhere.

Back on this side of the portal, the Bizen Osafune made a loud clang as it was knocked to the ground.

“Shinji!” Asuka called out.

Wolfpack had arrived.



The two black messengers touched their plates and spread apart,
opening a square window between them.

Chapter 36:
Hikari and Asuka

Wolfpack made the first move. It opened its maw to reveal a bluish-white ring lining its mouth. Even after being broken up and reconstituted by the spatial lens, the United States Eva had retained the particle accelerator it received after consuming Ramiel. The ring fired a bluish-white beam.

Armaros manifested a field over her serpent head gauntlet and deflected the beam with her left arm.

Wolfpack closed its mouth, but it hadn't given up yet. Its hairs stood on end as it opened its maw again. This time, *two* particle accelerating rings lined its mouth. This second beam was brighter than the first.

Armaros blocked again with her field-reinforced left arm, but the recoil was so great that the black giant was knocked back.

Even so.

"Hikari! Can you hear me?"

Armaros growled in a stagnant, though still human, voice. <<A…su…ka…>>

But she lifted the goose-necked muzzle of the Field Piercer and aimed it at Wolfpack.

"I wanted to thank you, Hikari!"

Eva-02 remained dormant atop the giant Wolfpack's crest. Asuka shouted from within the protruding plug, the wind whipping her hair.

"I know you and your Eva saved me and Unit Two countless times!"

If Mari—Wolfpack—was headed to the Ark, then Armaros was sure to stand in their way.

But the black giant looked like she was wavering as she prepared her next attack. <<Your mother…is within…my Heurtebise…and your Eva…>>

Armaros fired the Devil's Backbone. Wolfpack anticipated the attack and leaped into the air. The phase light grazed Eva-02 on the giant beast's head. Gamma rays and other radiation rained down like stardust over Asuka's head.

She'd always suspected it. Now there was someone to corroborate her theory. Even as Armaros, Asuka believed Hikari. Her best friend.

"Thank you."

Asuka's heart burned within her. She felt the tip of the plug heat up, too, and she finally received feedback from her control console.

"Hey now!" She had control over Eva-02's arms. Asuka balled up her fists and knocked them into her chest, rattling her restraint armor.

With basic functionality restored, the plug began its reinsertion. The display rebooted itself, and Mari made herself known.

<<I can see the Eva in your pack now. Are you leaving?>>

"I am."

Eva-02's body stirred as the sync test pattern disappeared, and Asuka's vision opened up. She brought her arms down to her side, pulling herself away from Wolfpack. The amalgamation of life-forms strained. Asuka flinched from the pain, but she didn't give up.

"Sorry if this hurts, Mari!"

Asuka's main display scattered again, as if the pack was howling in anguish. Various life-forms rippled over Wolfpack's back, reluctant to let her go.

Azuchi howled and chased them off. It was as if she was telling the wild animals to "Stay away from the human!" Such was the duty of *Canis lupus familiaris*. It had broken away from the wolves so that it might live with humans.

Wolfpack jumped into the air over the black giant, shaking the earth and covering the sky with its giant body. Eva-02 writhed on top of it, squirming and creaking. Tissues of the amalgamated Wolfpack were torn from it as the giant beast landed, leveling a small patch of forest.

A burst of blood-red rain spattered from the elliptical hole that had housed Eva-02. Asuka and her Eva had landed on the ground, freed from the congregation.

Slowly, the red giant lifted its face. Hair flowed down its back,

which was covered in Wolfpack's blood. This hair, which was the synthesis of its N_2 reactor and the graviton floaters from its Crimson A1 days, fluttered like feathers.

The N_2 reactor's power is cut off. It's not recognizing the floaters. But I can work with this.

"You could've gone straight to the Ark, you know," Asuka said.

That's where you want to go, isn't it?

<<I wanted to ask you how to eat the Ark,>> Mari said.

"Ugh, even if I knew, I wouldn't tell you."

Eva-02 picked up the abandoned Bizen Osafune.

"Achtung, bitte! My name is Soryu Asuka Langley, and I've returned to where I should be."

The command center, 1,200 kilometers away, immediately responded.

<<This is Hakone command to Eva-02. Your signal is plaintext, and your IFF isn't recognized, either. Use the prescribed encryption.>>

Well, yeah. Unit Two got ionized and reconstituted. What do you expect?

"I probably can't encrypt because I'm a little out of sync. Just sync me up, will you?"

Chapter 37:
Ogasawara Islands

THE JSSDF AKASHIMA had built a frontline base camp facing Yomotsu Hirasaka on Chichijima, an island in the Ogasawara Islands that could withstand the abnormal tides caused by the Earth's shrinking diameter and reduced gravity. Nerv Japan had had the same idea, but their organization was far too small, no matter how many Evangelions they possessed. They couldn't afford to split their resources like the JSSDF.

Lieutenant Colonel Kasuga leaped onto the scaffolding of the observation deck in the armored prefab building.

"Where is it?!"

"It's close, sir. Right on top of Anijima next door."

He peered through his binoculars into the raging wind. "A Torwächter window! Any news from Endo at Tsukino Yami?!"

"They're in the middle of a rescue operation on the other side of the operation. North American Alliance—"

Something winged shot out of the window over Anijima's mountain peak.

"IFF belongs to Nerv Japan's Eva-01 Final Model."

Shinji felt like he was being dragged away.

"Gah!"

He crashed into the woods below. The shock brought him back to his senses. His vision was red and hazy. Was he surrounded by the ocean?

"This isn't Yomotsu Hirasaka…"

The Powered 8 railgun had unlatched itself from his back and bounced away. Final Model scrambled for the rifle, but twenty hands appeared over the muzzle.

"Wh-what?!"

He fired, blowing the head off the lead Carrier, sending it crashing to the ground.

Behind him, the white wings of the Angels spread over the blindingly blue sky. In their center was the tip of the Lance of Longinus, suspended twenty thousand kilometers in orbit with its coiling tail.

It made an L-shaped turn and sped toward him. He knew what it was after. The lance had halted over the Yomotsu Hirasaka, the umbilical cord that connected the new world of the moon to the Earth. Now it was intent on skewering Shinji. The helical prongs had unraveled themselves, looking like piano wire. The weapon accelerated, anxious to fall upon its target.

"Shinji?"

Unit Two looked south from Yomotsu Hirasaka, noticing this sudden acceleration.

"Hakone command, Shinji's in trouble!"

<<Ikari-kun…broke the sky lens.>> Hikari/Armaros said. <<That's why I must take his heart…and crush it.>>

"Don't you dare taint Hikari's voice with your arrogance!"

Shinji!

Meanwhile, Hakone had come to the same conclusion.

"We've calculated its trajectory! It's heading for Chichijima on the Ogasawara Islands!"

"Commander, Final Model's IFF signal is relocated to Anijima in Chichijima!"

"What?!"

It was just as Asuka had predicted.

"Put Eva-01 Final Model on the line!"

Misato was still negotiating with Kaji in the cafeteria. Fuyutsuki and the strategic team in the command center were still in their stations. But they all heard Shinji's scream as he was held down by six Carriers.

<<Uwaaaaaah!>>

The sound sliced the very air they breathed.

The Lance of Longinus gained speed and light as it accelerated. Shinji could do nothing but brace himself. Then he heard a distant thud, as if something had landed nearby. A huge shadow fell across the restrained Final Model.

What was that noise?

Misato had felt it, but she couldn't take her eyes off of Longinus's descent on the terminal. Suddenly, something that looked like the roots of a plant blocked the distant view of the screen.

<<Take control of the camera! You people need to maintain the observation equipment better.>> Fuyutsuki shouted over the comms.

"Command, what's happening?!"

"Commander!" The security staff in the cafeteria were growing restless. Not exactly nerves, but their voices were a mixture of terror and confusion.

The roots weren't covering the camera lens.

Black roots covered the sky over Hakone, weaving together. Misato went out onto the terrace and looked up "What is this?"

"Impossible!" Even Seele/Kaji was surprised. "How did it manifest itself in the third dimension?!"

Chapter 38:
Roots of the World Tree

THE SAME PHENOMENON was occurring everywhere in the world. Roots covered the skies. The stratospheric platform over the equator, the backbone of the world's communications network, had begun mooring around the roots, making them dangerous to navigate. Observations from the fleet of high-altitude aircraft were coming in, and people around the world learned that the sky was covered with black roots.

They all shared one thought. Was this Armaros' doing?

"Wooowie!"

Little Rei Six whistled to herself as she looked at the roots in the sky. Eva-0.0 Type-F had been tasked with suppressing Trois' siege, and she was currently headed northwest from the caldera toward Nagao Pass, where she could assume sniping position.

The roots were intertwined, leading to a trunk high in the sky. Countless thinner tendrils hung down from the thicker roots, though their tips disappeared before they could reach the ground.

"Wooowie!"■

Final Model was unreachable, and no one knew what had happened to the Lance of Longinus. Hakone command was abuzz, analyzing the roots' data.

"Gravitational flux not detected at any point! Instead, gravitational pressure and the strain of the Longinus Ring over the equator are steadily decreasing!"

"That's impossible!"

"Is that the real thing?!"

"Look at the weather map! The jet stream is changing course because of the trunk."

Fuyutsuki watched the scene with a different kind of awe from the rest of the staff. "The absolute terror. The World Tree in the Antarctic. The roots that went down forever and disappeared into nowhere. Am I seeing its full stature now?" he whispered to himself.

"Gendo dispatched an expedition for the Lance of Longinus there."

The sudden words startled him. Fuyutsuki turned around. The elevator doors opened to reveal the Seele/Kaji.

"This is the World Tree, the true form of what you people refer to as the tunnel network. The road that connects the Human Instrumentality Project."

Fuyutsuki was aghast. "Who allowed this menace into the command center?!"

"I did." Commander Misato said.

"I've been given permission to fire at will, sir, don't you worry." A security guard trained his pistol at the Kaji-vessel and stepped inside.

The display showed what had become of the skies around Hakone.

The tunnel network. A passageway used by Angel Carriers, Torwächters, Quatre's corrupted mutant Eva, and the black giant Armaros. An invisible highway that might as well have been magic.

The way Kaworu had described it to Shinji, it was the trap room for the Human Instrumentality Project's stage. Remembering her own warp experience, Misato felt that might be the best way to explain it.

"But I thought that thing was underground—"

"Not underground but in another dimension. It's displayed itself

across the sky for your understanding," Seele/Kaji said with obvious annoyance. He hadn't predicted this development.

For our understanding?

"This 3D representation doesn't truly reflect the shrinking of space to shorten the distance traveled. Think of this as a visualization."

"So you're saying…someone visualized this?"

No, she still didn't get it. The explanation only brought forth more questions. Misato squinted her eyes, and her confusion triggered Seele/Kaji's rage.

"To whom has the boundaries of the world been shown? Who has observed it? Who threw the spear, like Lucretius of ancient Rome, to see the limits of human observation?" Seele/Kaji shouted.

But even he fell silent with surprise at what came next. Quiet fell over the command center, and not because of Seele/Kaji's revelations.

As Kaji had suggested, the roots spread all over the observable world. Indeed, they were now covering the moon.

But their expedition didn't stop there. One of the roots disappeared toward the sun's surface, like a fuse about to be lit.

<<How far does the world go?>>

Shinji had shouted those words when he threw the lance birthed from Final Model into the sky.

Seele/Kaji slouched in his steel chair as he listened to the things that had happened so far.

"That spear wasn't prepared by the Human Instrumentality Project. To begin with, that spear of materialism sung by the Roman philosopher was a question. A question of how far one could throw the spear outside the known universe. The spear was a metaphor for the limits of recognition."

In the face of worldwide calamity, the lower deck of the command center was confirming the safety of Final Model, the current location of the Lance of Longinus, and the organization of a world thrown into chaos.

Meanwhile, the top deck was preoccupied with exchanging personal theories about the calamity.

The difference was so great that Misato's ears began ringing.

We've made a mythology.

Seele/Kaji sighed. "That is what the Thirteenth Angel, Nagisa Kaworu, said. But the son of Gendo…! He flung the spear to the limits of his known universe. If you wish to know where that is, feel free to ask the third puppet."

"Trois?" Misato mused. "The limits of her and Shinji's known universe… Do you mean the Apple's Core? You're saying that's where he threw the spear?"

"The spear of wisdom can exceed the speed of light. He flung the lance to the other side of the sun, and the lance flies true. No wonder then, that the World Tree has manifested itself."

<<This is the world Ikari-kun chose.>>

Kaji's statement reminded Misato of what Ayanami had once said.

"What we currently see is the known universe according to the son of Gendo—according to Ikari Shinji."

<<Hakone—mand! This is Eva-01…Final Model.>>

"Shinji-kun?!" Misato turned to the display in amazement. Fuyutsuki issued orders to the communication booth at the lower deck.

"Those roots are affecting our communication lines. Switch communication relay to municipal disaster prevention band if the underwater cables to Ogasawara are still functional."

"Hakone command to Final Model. Shinji-kun, are you all right?"

<<Kzzt. I'm fine for now…but I'm engaged with several Carriers.>>

His voice became clearer.

"We're on the JSSDF circuit now," Hyuga said.

"It's from the Akashima Unit. Lieutenant Colonel Kasuga. He says Final Model is engaged with six Carriers in the sky over Anijima. They're all surrounded by roots."

Misato breathed a sigh of relief and then asked the burning question. "What happened to the Longinus?! Our seismographs detected

some kind of impact, but we can't see anything from here."

<<I don't know,>> Shinji said. <<These black roots showed up before it could hit me. The Longinus and its entire length were buried in it but never went through.>>

"Mr. Seele?" Misato asked Kaji.

"The Longinus…is now in the flow of the World Tree."

<<These roots are so annoying! I can't fly straight! What are these things?!>>

PART 6

NEON GENESIS

AETHER FLUX

EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 39:
Wayward Lance

Perpetual earthquakes shook the once-green plateaus of Mongolia, now laid bare by locusts. Quakes shook the very structure of the Earth, and not just figuratively. Complex terrain, like eroded rivers, which would have taken tens of thousands of years to form, had been carved into the globe over the last few months. This place was close to the cold plume of the Earth's mantle, and it pulled all the plates to it. Tectonic movement had intensified ever since the Longinus had wrapped itself around the world. No one knew what had happened to the fallen nations situated above the ditch of the mantle.

But today, the quakes had gone silent. They'd gone silent ever since the tree appeared in the sky.

And then, the ground rumbled again as new mountain peaks were born in the distance.

That was what most people thought, anyway.

In fact, it wasn't the Earth that shook, but the roots.

The rumbling reverberated through all the corners of the sky.

The Longinus had been aiming toward piercing Eva-01 Final Model when it plunged into the roots of the World Tree. It had formed a ring with itself while in orbit, but the tunnel network took all thirty thousand kilometers of its length.

And still it continued to grow.

Chapter 40:
Pillaging Machine

"Asuka?!"

<<What the…?! Are these…roots?>>

Hakone command had momentarily lost Asuka's signal from Yomotsu Hirasaka Island, due to the appearance of the tunnel network. Her voice was choppy now, and they had zero visuals.

"Hakone command to Final Model!"

<<Understood. Heading there now!>>

The phenomenon had spared Final Model from being skewered, but they couldn't afford to tarry.

Meanwhile, Aoba noticed a point of similarity among the reports coming in about the World Tree. He notified Commander Katsuragi Misato.

"So, this was only visible immediately after the phenomenon appeared."

He brought the video over to the command seat.

"The thin, vertical roots hanging from the thick horizontal roots disappeared before they could reach the ground, but they were reported to have been sucking something up."

The video was blurry, but it *did* look like there were lumps traveling up the roots.

"They appear to be rocks and boulders, but I don't think they're sucking up the ground. We can no longer see this happening."

"How are we supposed to tell what this is?" Misato filed the information away for later and returned her attention to the battlefield.

It was then that a distressed Maya barged into the command center.

"Who let Asuka pilot Unit Two?!"

Eva-02 had reappeared on Yomotsu Hirasaka, attached to the U.S.

Eva's back after being ionized and reconstituted. Maya knew that much before Asuka and Toji had left for the island. But she didn't expect them to find it, let alone pilot it. She didn't think Eva-02 couldn't move on its own after being fused with Wolfpack.

"Dr. Ibuki, I ask you to refrain from making statements that cast doubt on the operation in the command center," Fuyutsuki warned her.

The commander turned around. "No one gave her permission to do anything. But considering the fact that the Eva is moving when it shouldn't be, don't you think this is a lucky break?"

Pretty much everyone agreed with that. The revival of Eva-02 gave humanity a chance to fight back in the final battle against the beings who claimed divinity.

"It's such a lucky break that anyone is bound to be suspicious of it," Maya said. She put on a headset and began talking to the display. "Asuka, you spent a long time as an amalgamated entity! You know your individuality isn't stable yet. Get out of the Eva!"

<<You're kidding,>> Asuka responded. <<All systems are green in Unit Two, and there are no problems with my vitals. It's ridiculous how good this all feels.>>

Misato turned around. "Maya, what's bothering you?"

"Asuka is currently wearing the synchronization-suppressing orichalcum plugsuit, and yet her sync rates remain elevated. This might be a prelude to something. Or maybe it's happened already."

<<Whoa!>> Asuka's voice interrupted their conversation. <<This isn't the time for theorizing!>>

Visuals returned to the display, showing an Asuka doubled-over in laughter.

<<Can you see what I'm seeing? It's a damn mess right now.>>

Eva-02 was running with the Bizen while the mountainous Wolfpack roared like a barrage of artillery. It pointed its gaping maw up and fired its particle beam at the sky.

Armaros and the two Torwächters had been freed from the restraints of the Earth and were now flying through the roots of the World Tree covering the skies.

The roots formed a net over the horizon, from which even more roots extended. They kept creeping west, and it seemed as if they would soon make the return trip and encroach from the east.

The three black giants danced through the air, suspended on these additional roots. The one connected to Armaros looked familiar. It glowed much like the Tree of Life during the consummation of the Human Instrumentality Project three years ago. The only difference was that this one was black.

“So, the back plates of the giants…are the tips of the roots of the World Tree>>”

“What is going on?!” Fuyutsuki shouted.

<<I guess we know who the puppet and puppet master are now,>> Asuka said.

And it was true. The two Torwächters looked like marionettes whose strings were being manipulated by Armaros.

Misato turned to Seele/Kaji, still surrounded by security guards.

“So, this is the image of the black giants’ identity.”

“Took you long enough,” Kaji said. “The son of Gendo has placed the World Tree in the sky. Armaros and its two messengers are the fruits that hang from the roots.”

Chapter 41:
Marionette

"SO IT'S STUPID SHINJI'S FAULT that the land battle turned into an aerial battle!"

Asuka's battlefield had gained a new dimension.

"Hikari!"

She still referred to Armaros by her friend's name as the black giant flew higher into the air. The two Torwächters now attacked like they were rappelling on ropes. Their flight paths were easy to read on an individual level, but the fact that she had to face two of them at once made predicting their movements much harder.

Asuka tried predicting their maneuvers based on the fulcrums attached to the roots but to no avail.

"This…isn't…fair!"

To make matters worse, their momentum changed every time they hopped from one trunk to another. She was currently equipped with the Bizen Osafune, the longsword that Shinji had left behind. As far as swords went, it had extraordinary reach, but it wasn't designed to fight aerial enemies.

<<Hakone command to Unit Two. Fall back to the battleship! You have weapons waiting for you.>>

<<This is the battleship *Yamato*. We are currently fifty clicks away from the southeast shore of the island. ETA—>>

Whatever it was, she didn't have time for it. *To think that my Unit Two, the first Eva aside from the specially equipped Unit Zeros to achieve flight, would be reduced to this!*

"Dammit! If only the Allegorica unit were reproduced, too! I flew to the moon with that thing!" Asuka gritted her teeth.

Wait…what?

She felt a spine-chilling déjà vu as she looked at the sky, like she was being sucked up into the azure expanse.

I think I *flew when I was synthesized with the Eva…*

The two Torwächters were like synchronized dancers as they opened another window. Three Angel Carriers flew out of it.

"Again?!"

The Carriers descended, and the Torwächters spindles came flying with them. Asuka evaded their attacks, noticing that Armaros was no longer paying her any heed.

"What are you looking at, Hikari?!"

An ultra-hard ribbon shot out of a Carrier's cocoon right at the U.S. Eva. Sparks flew as Asuka blocked it with her blade.

Another Zeruel? This can't get any worse!

"Mari!"

Eva-02 turned face up. The point of the Bizen was now sheathed in an A.T. Field, and it blew away the Carrier that swooped down at it. It made another turn and heaved the point at the sky again.

"Hah!"

The blast of the A.T. Field blew the Carrier away where she couldn't see it, but she was now in the trajectory of the Torwächter's spindle.

"Hikari!"

An intense shock wave accompanied a bright beam. The Zeruel Carrier activated its A.T. Field, deflecting Wolfpack's ray. The explosion of light was blinding.

"Gah!"

A stray bullet made it through Eva-02's field, knocking it off-balance and burning its back. Error warnings blared from the N_2 reactor, suggesting an immediate cease of operations.

Her attacks weren't reaching Armaros.

Her words weren't reaching Hikari.

Asuka saw the distance between them as a failure of her will.

I have to go there.

How did I fly?

“I need those wings. I need them *now*.”

Asuka’s left hand unconsciously reached to the collar of her plugsuit, touching the ever-loosening zipper.

“Don’t do it, Asuka!” Maya’s voice boomed in the command center. “That thing is the only wall you have separating your *self* from the Eva!”

On the other side of the island, the JSSDF Akashima had regrouped with the remaining forces of the North American Alliance. The three aerial attack platforms, whose mission was to explode the Ark with their N_2 charges, were somehow spared the fate of saltification and beastification, despite their proximity to the Ark. The crew of the Akashima, a robot equipped with similar N_2 technologies, had also remained human.

They’d managed to repel a Sachiel-type Angel Carrier with a saturation attack. Now they were fending off black creatures that crawled out of the ground, ever-shifting, neither animate nor inanimate. The creatures were fragments of life-form data that had spilled out of the Ark, pitiful but still dangerous.

Humanity fought back, not to be defeated by these incomplete life-forms. Soldiers fired their guns from the ground, while the American attack platforms used their aerial battery to lay waste to their opponents with depleted uranium that rained across the battlefield like a storm.

Supersonic downpour and the bloodied remains of black monsters fell upon the beautiful forest. Overhead, scavengers circled the battlefield, salivating as their feast of carrion was prepared for them.

A loud rumble echoed from the earth, louder than all the artillery fire. Fresh greenery sprouted from dark red ground, rippling through the battlefield like a shadow, again and again.

“This is unreal!” the pilot of the Akashima’s upper body said.

“The American attack platforms deployed on the coastal LZ have managed to slip through the roots with supplies. Good timing, too. We’re at forty percent ammunition,” the navigational spotter reported.

Endo sucked a tube of energy gel in the harness of his command chair. “Apples…”

< <This is the Brazilian Third Brigade. Thank you for rescuing our men. > >

But the rescue mission had reduced Endo's support of the battle with Armaros to a single shot. Shrike One and Shrike Two, the Akashima's offensive spotters, were forced to fly at low altitude so their N_2 reactors could be used as umbrellas.

"Well, our UAVs keep getting eaten by those giant bird things."

"Hand-off confirmed. Incoming at nine o' clock! More red particles spreading from the Ark."

The red particles were life-form data, which turned into black monsters wherever they fell.

"Wait, hang on… Something's weird here."

Endo shifted his body to look at a periscope-shaped camera. The Ark was on the other side of the cliff. Red particles were scattering from the rock face, but a throng of them suddenly shot up, weaving between the vertical roots as they flew south.

"Akashima to Nerv Japan! Be on the lookout! The Ark just spat out a mass of red particles, and it's heading your way!"

Chapter 42:
To the Light

SEVERAL HUNDRED KILOMETERS to the north of Yomotsu Hirasaka, in the skies above the Ogasawara Islands, Shinji was locked in a ferocious battle. He'd been carried away by Type-3 Angel Carriers, and the winged white revenants were refusing to let him go.

I could fly if it weren't for these roots!

Even if Hakone command had told him that he was the origin of the roots of the World Tree, Shinji probably wouldn't have understood. The roots had a glossy black sheen to them, as if they were covered with resin. It was the same shade of black as Armaros and the mindless Torwächters she manipulated.

The whole thing was like a nightmare.

Something caught on Final Model's leg. An arm extended from the cocoon of the Carrier behind him—a thick arm, with sharp claws.

Which Angel is this supposed to be?!

He forced himself away from it, but another Carrier tackled him with its power shield before he could regain his footing.

"Urgh!"

The A.T. Field-like shield knocked Final Model away, sending him tumbling across the sky into one of the roots.

"Dammit!"

He fired a depleted uranium round from the light alloy sabot of the Powered 8 railgun, but it was instantly turned into a puff of rainbow ions by the shield. Final Model was still off-balance, but he took the knife and attached it to the point of the Powered 8 CL.

"Come on!"

THRUM!

Final Model's heart throbbed as the quantum warp moved the micro black hole to the point of the knife. The bayonet glowed menacingly as Shinji brought it down on the Carrier latched to his leg.

The micro black hole blade glowed with heat rather than vacuum, and Shinji thrust it deep inside the cocoon.

I hit something!

But whichever Angel possessed the arm didn't die. It was clamping as hard as it had been before. The Carrier whirled, and Shinji saw a power shield-encased staff coming right at him. The blow hit Final Model hard, in a rush of blinding pain.

What is happening?!

He held the bayonet in front of his chest to fend off the next attack, but it never came.

He could no longer move in free fall. The sea was approaching quickly.

Suddenly, Maya's voice came in from the command center.

<<Shinji-kun, you have to get back to Asuka! That girl is about to synthesize with her Eva again!>>

A giant pillar of saltwater rose up from the center of the Pacific as Final Model slammed into the ocean at peak velocity. Then the water was sucked back in, and a whirling white spiral broke the surface.

Don't do it, Asuka!

The water was boiled and electrified, instantly turning to plasma. A powerful shock wave overwhelmed the three Carriers, breaking their shields and turning them into mincemeat.

A glowing left arm pointed at the sky like a blade. It rushed through the Q.R. Signums in two of the Carriers' shoulders with intense heat. But the arm went right through the cocoon in the third Carrier's abdomen.

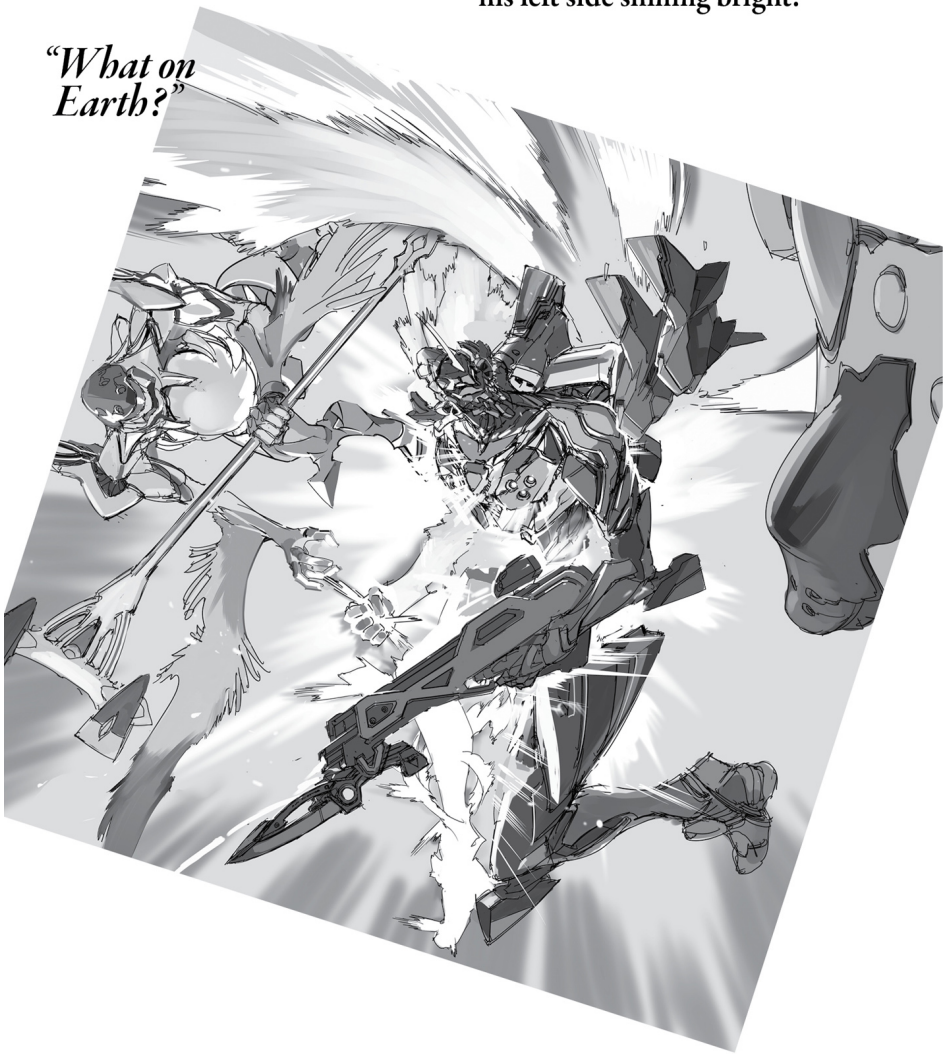
"I see!" Fuyutsuki said. "The larval Angel of the seemingly immortal Carrier was the twin Angel Israfel, and both had to be destroyed at the same time!"

The elation in his voice didn't last long. What came next shook everyone.

Eva-01 Final Model leaped out of the swarming clouds, his left side shining bright.

"What on Earth?" Misato whispered, watching as the camera on Chichijima shook.

Eva-01 Final Model leaped out of the swarming clouds,
his left side shining bright.



The next moment, the giant plummeted into the ocean again. His mass created a path through the unfathomable depths, a path he used to speed away in the direction of Yomotsu Hirasaka.

The vertical roots dangling over the archipelago were no more. If these had been the doorways to the tunnel network, it would explain how one could warp to a place with no earth.

All that was left now was a straight line. The sky burned red with remnants of the quantum effects, reflecting on the divided sea.

“Has it finally begun?”

Final Model faded into the distance. While his size remained the same, half of his body glowed with the intense light.

Maya sank into her seat on the top deck with resignation. Still in shock, she turned to look at the status board that reported Final Model’s telemetry.

Shinji had burned into his life span again. 0.5 seconds had been taken out of his remainder. The Third Impact inched ever closer within his compressed time.

Chapter 43:
Ghosts

Tokyo-3. The shores of Lake Ashi.

Ayanami Rei Trois continued to garrison herself within the Glass Egg in order to protect the replica Longinus. She called up Six through their mental mirroring.

Never mind me, Six. Go to Yomotsu Hirasaka.

<<You shouldn't say that to someone who has her sights on you.>>

Six laughed. The battle on Yomotsu Hirasaka was intense. But the current situation had forced Six's Eva-0.0, the most technologically advanced Evangelion in Nerv Japan's arsenal, to deal with Trois' little siege.

Trois noticed some kind of noise, and she turned her head toward the opening of the egg. She enhanced the auditory senses of her Eva.

Static.

<<……>>

<<I repeat…>>

A voice?

A distant voice, if it was a voice at all.

Where is it coming from?

It seemed to have come from inside the egg. But did it also come from all around her?

<<*…account for the distortions…*>>

<<*Let's hope…avoids entropy…*>>

What did that mean?

Were the troops outside launching some kind of psychological attack?

<<Proceed.>>

Trois' ruby eyes widened.

She knew that voice.

"Commander Ikari."

< <……> >

"Commander Ikari!" She shouted, a wave of emotions flooding her. "Commander Ikari! Commander Ikari!!!"

How did she know? Later, she wouldn't be able to explain it during questioning, but Rei Trois had kept the memories of the original Ayanami. She cried out his name over and over until finally…

< <Rei?> >

An answer.

< <Commander?> >

< <The shell is resonating…Dr. Akagi…cease operations…do not make a sound…> >

Trois had started talking to herself…and someone had responded.

The monitoring crew back in the command center heard it all. They'd been split into three. Two were in charge of broadcasting everything from Yomotsu Hirasaka and its surroundings, while one was tasked with negotiating with Trois.

"She's talking to someone…and that someone is talking back!"

Fuyutsuki issued orders to the distraught crew in the middle deck. "Increase the volume inside the plug and filter out the noise."

< <Rei…sent Eva-01…did he make it?> >

Misato, engrossed in the battle over the distant Pacific, immediately turned her head when she heard that voice.

"Hang on…what's happening? Put this conversation on the main line!"

"Ikari…" Fuyutsuki murmured.

It was the voice of Ikari Gendo, the former commander of Nerv. Members of the staff old enough to serve under his command could vouch for this.

<< Yes, Ikari…Shinji is here, >> Trois answered.

Her voice was trembling, and she knew it.

"Has the intelligence division initiated their manipulation tactics?" Misato asked, just in case.

"No…this is physically impossible!" Hyuga showed her the source of the sound.

"The walls of the Glass Egg are reverberating to transmit the voice. But there's no known technology that can do that!"

"How should we take this, Maya?"

Ibuki was on the floor. One of the security guards surrounding Kaji helped her to her feet.

"If that really is former commander Ikari…" she began.

Misato beat her to it. "I thought Lilith's Chronostatic Sphere with Commander Ikari and all the rest was underneath Yomotsu Hirasaka now."

Chief Ibuki of the science and engineering division nodded. "The Glass Egg is supposedly the shell of the Chronostatic Sphere that Lilith transported to Hakone from the previous world. Perhaps it's resonating with no regard for distance."

"The shell of the Chronostatic Sphere can resonate? But the accelerated flow of time—"

"It might be starting to tune itself to the outside. Perhaps the egg is about to hatch."

<< …model…forming a singularity… We contained it, but did you manage to fix it completely? >>

Now came the voice of Dr. Akagi Ritsuko.

<< Yes. Chief Ibuki stabilized it, >> Trois responded.

<< I see…she did it… >> Ritsuko's voice was tinged with emotion.

"Maya?"

By the time Misato turned around, Maya had left the command center.

"Contact security! Do not open fire at a lab coat-wearing woman heading for the Glass Egg! That goes for you, too, Six."

< < Unit Zero Type-F, loud and clear. > >

Despite her carefree response, Ayanami Rei Six still trained her Field Piercer, the Angel's Backbone, on Trois' Eva from outside the mountain line.

Fuyutsuki was shocked. "Trois better not be planning on taking Dr. Ibuki hostage!"

Misato sighed. "I don't think those girls—Trois and Maya both—would use human lives as bargaining chips. For better or worse, they don't recognize the worth of an individual life."

Misato asked Hyuga to call up the laboratory of Aoba's former professor on the display. She still needed a scientific eye to assess the situation.

"She just wants to meet an old friend. That's all."

Chapter 44:
Red Shift

Shinji's voice called out to her. < <Final Model to Unit Two. Asuka, just hang in there! I'm on my way! > >

Asuka had one hand on the control stick to swing the Bizen as the fingers of her left hand played with the loosening zipper on her collar.

"Hikari… She's looking at something."

Her right arm lurched wildly, and the Bizen swung diagonally, as if cutting the sky itself.

"I have to go after her now, or I'll lose her."

The Torwächters rotated their spindles, but she deflected their projectiles.

"I have to go!"

She pulled the release tab on her neck. The zipper of her specially crafted orichalcum plugsuit came loose in the LCL, immediately slipping down her shoulders as the resin contracted.

"Huff!"

Asuka's skin burned as the connection between her and the Eva intensified. She remembered the agony she'd felt when the flood of life-form data overwhelmed her, disintegrating her physical body.

And yet, she wasn't afraid.

Stay with me.

Something was in the Eva-02. Time and time again, that something had lent her its power. It was the force that had allowed her to return when Hikari called out to her.

As the black giant, Hikari had confirmed the existence of this something.

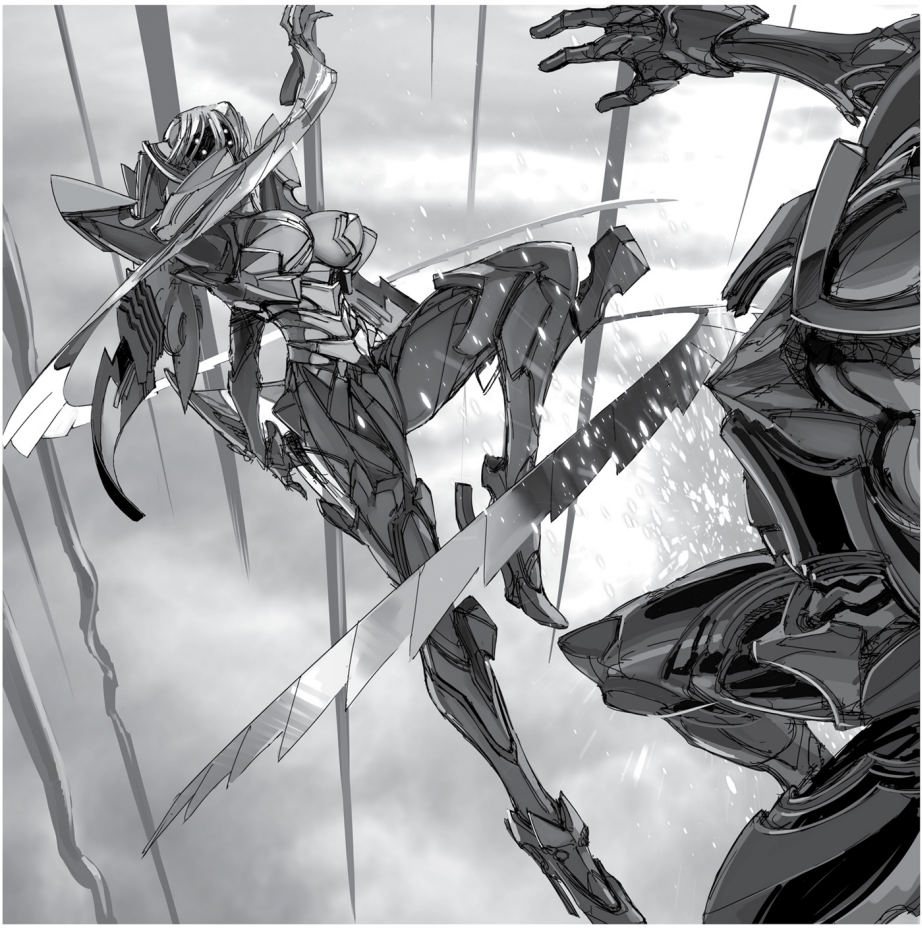
< <Your mother…is within…my Heurtebise…and your Eva… > >

Good enough for me.

The Bizen pierced the ground with a heavy thud. Light broke from her restraint armor, seeping out of the cracks, blowing it all away. Eva-02 leaned against the longsword as its legs failed. The Zeruel Carrier saw its chance and thrust its razor-sharp monolayered ribbon arm toward it.

A wind of red flecks enveloped Eva-02.

Life-form particles from the Ark.



Zeruel's arm was pulled into the whirlwind, and the centrifugal force would have torn it off had it not been so resilient. As it was, the larval Zeruel was yanked out of the Carrier's cocoon with great force. The umbilical that connected the two creatures was torn to shreds, and the larval Angel let out what sounded like a shriek of pain. It fired its zero-time light attack in retaliation before being sucked into the red wind. Emptied of its larval Angel, the Carrier lost its balance and fell backward.

Zeruel's two blade arms sprang out of the whirlwind, forming a cross. They slashed at the Carrier, shattering the Q.R. Signums on its shoulders and slicing its body to bits. Blood spurted out, but it was immediately caught up by the wind and blown into the sky.

The two Torwächters moved in to face this new threat, bringing their spindles down on it. The red wind reached out its Zeruel arms again to deflect them. Sparks crackled across the sky as the projectiles slid off of the blades. Zeruel's zero-time light attack glowed upon the waiting Torwächters, and the black giants were pushed back by the explosion mere moments later.

<<A…su…ka…>>

In the distance, the mountainous Wolfpack howled to urge Asuka on. It was the best Mari could do, given the progress of her assimilation. The sound was immediately picked up by the crimson particles.

The Asuka/Eva synthesis had appeared on the battlefield. The red wind enveloped her restraint armor, and she rammed the staggered Torwächter with her head.

Crimson A1. The form Eva-02 took as a protective measure against the encroaching life-form data of the Ark to keep Asuka's person intact. She'd willed it back into existence.

She stepped on the Torwächter and jumped away.

<<That's pathetic, Suzuhara. I thought you were supposed to… protect…Hikari…>>

Asuka retained her personality despite being mixed together with countless organisms. The surface of her body highlighted her feminine features. Her flowing hair was now the Allegoric wing unit. The graviton floaters activated.

The Asuka/Eva synthesis reached her hand out to Armaros, who

was being pulled up by the vertical roots. The black giant was looking northwest, over the horizontal layers of the primary roots of the World Tree.

She began sinking into the roots, as if caught up by a current.

< <Hikari! > >

Asuka went after her. But she needed Q.R. Signums to open a portal. It made her long to be a Torwächter again. Her memories of that time had been hazy, but they'd become vivid again once she synthesized with her Eva.

She sank her slender body into the tunnel network and disappeared from the skies above Yomotsu Hirasaka Island.

Chapter 45:
Substitute

"She's looking this way. Why?" Kaji whispered. "What is she…?"

He turned around, eyes flitting from one chaotic display to the next, stopped at one screen in particular.

Lake Ashi, darkened by a power outage. The Glass Egg…

"Katsuragi!" The Kaji-vessel suddenly called out. He took a step forward, and the two armed guards blocked him. He paid them no heed. "Get Ikari's puppet out of here!"

The top deck crew all stared at the dangerous man.

Misato and Fuyutsuki looked quizzically at him.

"What are you talking about?" Misato asked.

"The black giant is coming here to take the replica!" he shouted, despite the guards restraining him. "The moon's expansion has halted ever since the Longinus disappeared from orbit. You saw how the tunnel network ceased transporting materials from the Earth's mantle. It stopped because the lance is no longer pressurizing the Earth!"

This was the explanation for the strange sight they'd seen shortly after the appearance of the World Tree's roots.

"So…all those roots are like needles that sap the Earth of its lifeblood?!"

"That's why the Longinus is necessary for the creation of a new world! Even if it got lost within the tunnel network, the black giant should have retrieved it and flung it into orbit. *Should* being the operative word."

"What do you mean?"

"This new Armaros… She knows that she can use a substitute rather than wasting time trying to find the lance within the vast quantum flow!" Kaji tore his arm away from the guards to point at the Glass Egg. "And *there* is the replica Longinus!"

The spear that Ayanami Rei Trois had stolen to prevent it from being handed over to Seele.

Misato wasted no time. “Trois, keep yourself locked up! We’ll get you armed soon!” She spoke into her headset, broadcasting to all of HQ. “Alert! Armaros is coming!”

Fuyutsuki didn’t question her. He issued orders to the middle deck. “Lift the barricade on the Glass Egg. All sectors evacuate and ready shelters! Initiate urban combat procedures!”

“Urban combat procedures deployed.”

The alarm was followed by Magi’s hollow, artificial voice reading a canned message. < <The entirety of Tokyo-3 and the Hakone caldera has been put under Class One Threat.> >

“Six! Abort mission, now! Take the Unit Zero Type-F to the urban area.”

< <All right.> >

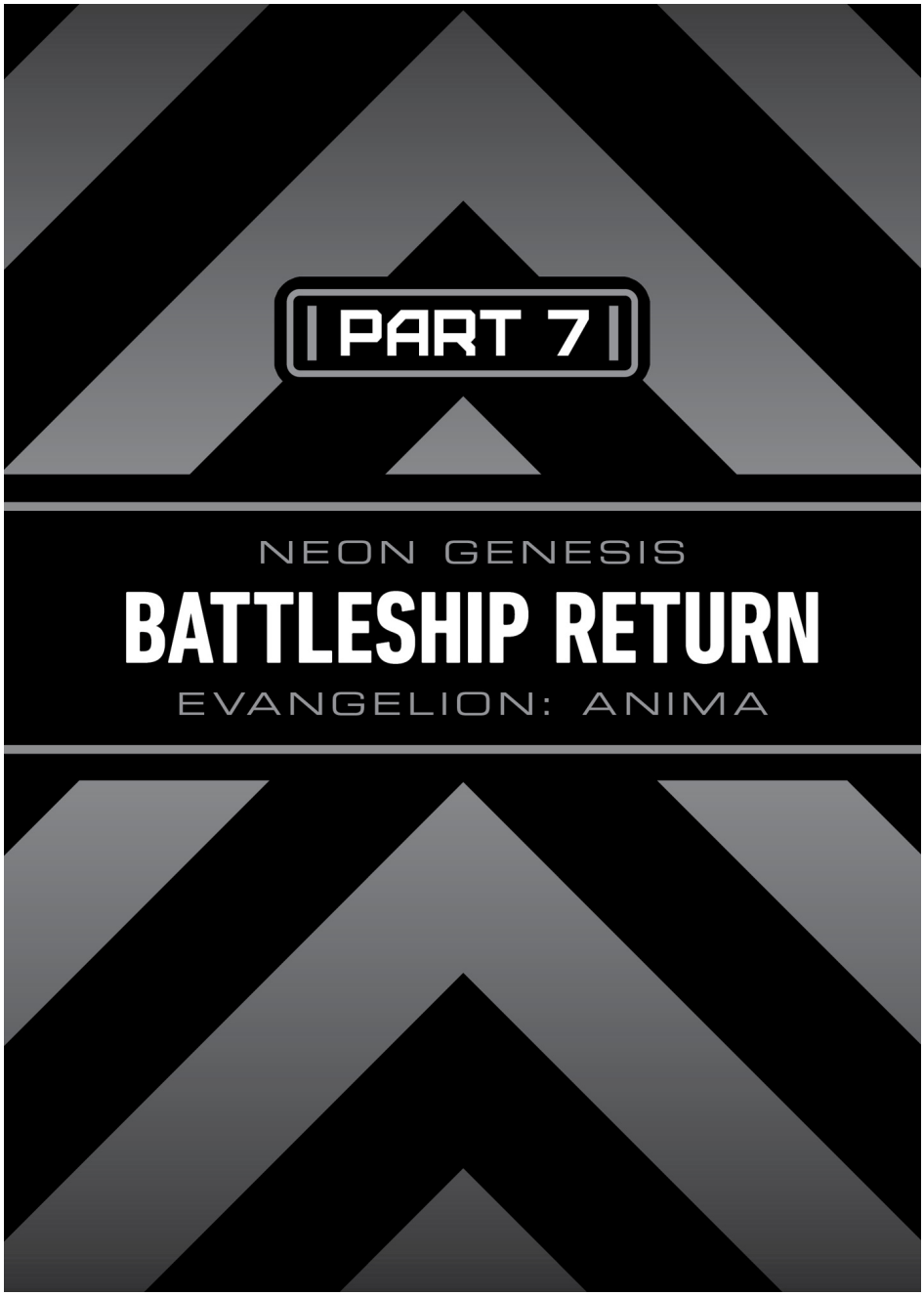
“Tell her to escape, Katsuragi!” For a moment, Kaji’s tone resembled the man who’d been Misato’s lover.

“Inform the JSSDF stationed at Gora and Mount Daikan Airport! We need all the help we can get!” And with that, Misato hung up the console and turned to the Kaji-vessel.

“Escape? And where to? Can you think of any place in the world that isn’t covered by the roots of the World Tree, Kaji-kun?”

“You promised us the lance!”

“Security, take him away.”


PART 7
NEON GENESIS
BATTLESHIP RETURN
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 46:
Armaros Hakone Assault

Alarms blared over Tokyo-3.

Armaros was coming.

Kaji Ryoji, current vessel of Seele, had revealed that much.

Aoba was in the eye of the storm, processing inquiries from government agencies.

The images on the screen showed people walking toward the shelters, some in the sun and some in the shade, as the city was slowly converted into a combat zone.

As Misato watched the hustle and bustle of the lower decks of the command center, she began to wonder if she'd jumped the gun. They were going on Seele's word alone.

"It would be better for you if I stayed here," the Kaji-vessel said with annoyance, as he was forced out of the command center.

Kaji had been a man with a constant smile on his face, but that smile had taken on a different meaning ever since Seele possessed him. Now it was the smile of a man who knew the inner workings of the world, a smile that looked down on humanity for their ignorance. Something must have been very wrong for that smile to be wiped from his face.

Seele was afraid of the black giant who was coming for the replica of the Lance of Longinus.

<<This is Hakone command to Trois. You are to maintain your position. We are sending you armaments via the Togendai lift. Also, Dr. Ibuki is headed your way. Don't step on her.>>

"This is Trois. Copy that."

Trois' rebellion had been swept under the rug now that Armaros was approaching. She'd been ordered to stay within the Glass Egg, though no one had asked how she felt about it.

As far as she could see, the city was locking itself down. The armed vehicles barricading the bridge into the Glass Egg had opened up to make way for a single EV scooter. Trois peered through her gunsights to see who it was and then called out through her external speakers.

<<Dr. Ibuki!>>

"Trois, is the egg still resonating?!"

The scooter braked and slid smoothly on the steel plates set up for heavy equipment. The only sounds were the hum of Eva-0.0's external S^2 engine and the distant alarm coming from the entrance.

But then, another echo…

<<Is that you, Maya?>>

Ibuki would never forget that voice.

She staggered to her feet.

"Senpai!"

Akagi Ritsuko. Her predecessor, whom she respected as a scientist and despised as a person.

"Senpai, senpai! Akagi-senpai!"

Why had she devoted her life to researching Eva technology?

Why had she continued developing said technology?

Because something had happened three years ago that forced Maya to reconsider her life.

All because you disappeared…

<<I can hear you…Maya. Three years outside…inside…time goes on…Unit One…us that much.>>

The walls of the Glass Egg reverberated to transmit the voice of a person who wasn't there. It seemed that time was moving again within the Chronostatic Sphere.

<<Now, tell me your findings, Dr. Ibuki.>>

Right. I have three years' worth of research to catch her up on.

"Alert! Disturbance detected in the aerial roots!"

"Anomalous waves are going through international provisional root numbers 210 to 3166!"

A root of the World Tree over Hakone rippled faintly. The distortion ran across the sky toward Hakone. A similar phenomenon had been witnessed when the original Longinus, then 130,000 kilometers long, passed through the roots in the sky.

An alarm sounded.

“Quantum flow inclinometers are picking something up! Alpha decay observed. Probability of existence rapidly increasing!”

“The black giant is coming!” Seele/Kaji whispered as the guards escorted him out of the command center.

Fuyutsuki heard him and blurted out, “No! It’s too soon!”

The distortion traveling the roots became more humanoid in shape as it approached.

“We got a matching signature in the Magi! One hit…it’s Armaros!”

“It’s over the mountains! Within reach of the caldera!”

The black giant had taken the roots’ tunnel network and was now in the skies over Hakone.

Misato watched the board, as the city had yet to complete its armament protocols. She made the order. “Open fire!”

The battle-ready Tokyo-3 pointed in the direction of the black shadow and fired. But the focused artillery did nothing. Armaros merely dangled from the roots like a spider from its thread.

A ray of bright light struck the giant next. A shot from Little Rei Six. Eva-0.0 Type-F’s Angel’s Backbone.

<<Misato! There’s something weird going on with her field!>>

The Field Piercer was supposed to be the most effective weapon against A.T. Fields, and yet it couldn’t penetrate Armaros.

“Sensei?” Misato asked the scientist.

“Armaros is covered with Q.R. Signums. They might be functioning as a physical defense grid!”

Which meant ranged attacks were out of the question.

“Six, move into melee range!”

<<Copy tha—Whoa!>> Six yelped.

Armaros had fired something as she slid down the roots. Eva-0.0

Type-F activated its graviton floaters, turned around, and crushed the crystalline projectiles with the barrel of the Angel's Backbone.

They disintegrated into red dust.

"Q.R. Signums! Don't get caught by them!"

<<I know that!>>

Eva-0.0 Type-F kicked the ground with its four legs and bounded down the hill.

A transmission from Trois' Eva-0.0 flashed on the main display.

<<I'll retaliate with the Longinus.>>

Eva-0.0 switched out its gamma-ray laser cannon for the replica Longinus. The Eva held it with both hands over Maya's head.

It was then that the anomaly occurred. The helix of the replica bulged, and its twin points began to glow.

Trois' transmission window closed itself on the display of the command center, making it seem like the Ayanami had gone rogue yet again.

Kaji was being dragged to the elevator, but he fought back when he heard Trois' plan.

"No! You're playing right into her hands!" he shouted.

"Let him stay a little longer," Misato said, withdrawing her order. "Trois, remain within the shell! The black giant is after the spear!"

Everyone inside the command center—every person on the planet, really—was far too focused on Armaros' descent to notice what was going on within the Glass Egg.

And how could they not, when Armaros was so close to touching down on Hakone?

Six suddenly felt a sudden, sickening chill that made her want to throw up. It was as if a mass of negativity was pointing at her, *staring* at her. She leaped away.

BOOM!

The explosion grazed Eva-0.0 Type-F and blew away Nagao Pass, where it had just been standing.

“What was that?!”

The command center watched as the northwestern rim of Tokyo-3 was blown to pieces.

“The enemy’s Field Piercer!”

“You mean the Devil’s Backbone that Euro Eva had before it turned into Armaros?!”

Part of the mountainside was engulfed by the implosion, while the surrounding area was blown away by the shock waves generated from the impact. A giant mushroom cloud rose into the sky as dust rained down on Tokyo-3.

The Angel’s Backbone was the ultimate firearm. It could pierce any A.T. Field. The right arm and leg of Six’s Eva-0.0 Type-F had been fused into the barrel in order to stabilize the shot.

Heurtebise, however, was equipped with the *Devil’s* Backbone, a Field Piercer crafted out of an Eva’s spine and powered by a Q.R. Signum. The mind of the core was severely twisted, but in exchange, the weapon was hideously strong, as strong as the experimental Neyarl.

“Line 736 and its tunnel have burned down!”

“Be careful!”

<<I can still do this!>>

Six pressed on, flying over the mountain ridge to avoid firing at the city.

<<I just need to get a clean shot!>>

But the two plates on Armaros’ back had already descended, and they lodged themselves into the ground of Hakone caldera.

<<Not…there…>>

“That voice!”

<<Stay away…from my home.>>

The voice came from the roots in the sky, and it could only belong to one person.

“Asuka?!” Misato watched as Zeruel’s arms extended from the roots and chased after Armaros.

“What?!”

The Asuka/Eva synthesis, Crimson A1, had gained Zeruel’s razor-sharp feelers as it consumed the life-form data of the Ark. They wrapped themselves around Armaros’ right arm and yanked it up, dragging the black giant away, even though she was twice Crimson A1’s size. This was the power of the roots’ quantum flow. Even Armaros was helpless to resist, and she disappeared into the thick primary root.

Armaros and Asuka/Eva synthesis dipped and bobbed, in and out of the roots, shooting and slashing at each other.

“Asuka?!” Rei Six called out to her.

Crimson A1 responded in a monotone voice. < <Tell Shinji…to do something…about that idiot Suzuhara… > >

“But I thought Toji turned into a Torwächter on Yomotsu Hirasaka!”

< <He did… Just look outside for a second… > >

And with that, the two giants were carried away by the roots’ current, away from Hakone.

“Asuka bought us some time.”

“Not much,” Kaji said. “One wrong move, and she’ll be back.”

“Anomaly detected… Inside the Glass Egg!”

All attention shifted to the small image of the 666-meter egg.

“Why is it so dark?”

The inside of the Glass Egg had turned pitch-black. While its frosted-glass shell prevented whatever was inside from being clearly visible, the multi-layered floors and scaffolding built within the egg could still be seen after the egg had been dredged up from the bottom of the lake.

What had happened in that moment when everyone’s attention was diverted by the coming of Armaros?

Moreover, what had happened to Rei Trois and Maya inside?

Misato panicked. “Trois, status report!”

< <…… > >

“When did it start?!” Aoba shouted from the middle deck at one of the lower deck operators, who scrambled to play back the recording.

“The egg turned black about twenty seconds ago!”

Trois’ transmission window flickered to life on the main display. She’d returned.

<<Eva-0.0…Trois to…command…come in…>>

“This is Hakone command. What happened, Trois?”

<<The terrain outside the egg changed for 18.7 seconds. Orange light all around…>>

<<This is Ibuki. Can you hear me, command?>> Maya, also inside the Glass Egg, contacted them using her own transmitter.
<<Infrared thermometer readings showed the walls of the egg to be between nine and twelve hundred degrees Celsius. The entrance also disappeared for a while.>>

“The egg was pitch-black from the outside, too.”

<<The images on the eggshell must come from somewhere.>>

“Which means,” Misato said, “you might have been carried off to god-knows-where.”

Everyone turned to look at her on the top deck.

“Look,” Misato pointed.

The bridge connecting the Glass Egg to Lake Ashi’s shores had been disconnected. Concentric waves rippled out over the surface of the lake.

“The Glass Egg is moving up and down.”

Fuyutsuki squinted his eyes and then widened them. “Could it be…that the matter inside the egg was transported and then returned?”

“Any comments, Mr. Seele?”

“The egg underneath the island is Lilith’s egg, the one you call the Chronostatic Sphere. You figured out that much, I’m sure.” Kaji pursed his lips. “It’s resonating with the old egg’s shell in Hakone. Perhaps it’s a replacement of sorts. Either way, it’s allowed you to speak with Gendo and the others. Speak and nothing more.”

“What?”

Reports of the battle came in from middle deck. “We just got word

from the U.N. Relief Army, East Asian Division. Armaros and Crimson A1 have made contact over the Sea of Japan and are moving toward the continent."

"Keep tracking them!" Misato turned her chair to look at Kaji. "Are you saying that the inside of the egg switched places when it went dark?"

"Most likely. Your chief of science *did* see the magma underneath the new island."

"This is ridiculous…" was all Fuyutsuki could say.

"Wait, hang on." Misato shook her head. "Is it possible to make the switch permanent?"

"No. They're only resonances in the end," Kaji said. "Granted, they caused a temporary space displacement. But this phenomenon is unprecedented in the history of Seele. This was probably the height of it. Any further interference and the law of cause and effect would—"

He stopped before he could finish his elaboration.

Misato noticed Kaji's shoulders quivering. Was he laughing?

"The replica Longinus… Very well!" The Kaji-vessel raised his face. The smug grin had returned. "Katsuragi Misato, Commander of Nerv Japan. Let us come to a mutually satisfactory agreement."

A new alarm sounded, followed by the heavily armored headquarters grinding to a halt on its circular rails. The lights switched to emergency power.

"Rei Quatre's mutant Eva has infiltrated the lower levels! She's damaged the hull of the command car!"

"No! Where did she come from?! Why didn't we see her?!"

Fuyutsuki clung to the backrest of a chair for support. "You let her warp away so she could hide right under our noses!"

Kaji grinned. A loud rumbling came from the elevator shaft before its walls were blown away. Blocks of hard concrete tektite were strewn about the command center. The security guards who still had their wits about them opened fire on Kaji, but a giant hand blocked their bullets.

"It's the mutant Eva!"

Quatre's Eva-0.0, that hideous chimera of weaponry, had now gained the wings of an Angel Carrier.

Kaji—Seele, rather—hopped on to the palm and announced, “You may keep your castle. We shall take the replica Longinus and make our journey to the new world.”

Chapter 47:
Beyond the Twilight

"Now that I think about it…"

Kaji's explanation had struck a chord with Maya, who'd seen the helix of the replica Longinus unravel.

"Using the Eva to release the spear's energy might prolong the displacement phenomenon."

I could see senpai again?

But the mature part of her immediately suppressed her emotions. The scientist in her risked overlooking something.

Maya couldn't see the mutant Eva because of the smoke that rose from the fire at Nagao Pass. But she knew Quatre was fast approaching.

"Maybe we only heard the voices because the sphere is finally moving after a long period of stasis. The Glass Egg was formed as an approximation of the shell of the previous sphere."

The earth rumbled from outside the Glass Egg. Six's Eva-0.0 Type-F had landed.

<<Who do I shoot?!>> Six asked. <<Do I just let Kaji and Quatre in or do I try and stop them?>>

Despite being destroyed, the command center had retained its ability to process information. Fuyutsuki continued to issue orders from under an oxygen mask. A group of engineers had been hooked up to tubes and cables to provide support for the cage.

Had any good come out of it?

Armaros, who'd come to steal the Longinus replica, was now miles away. And there was a possibility that Ikari Gendo and Akagi Ritsuko, along with the rest of the personnel of the old HQ, might return.

But not everything smelled of roses.

The Lance of Longinus was lost. The Eva who'd used it had been transported to the sphere at the bottom of Yomotsu Hirasaka, where the fires of hell burned all around.

Misato wiped the dirt off her face as she weighed her options. “Put Quatre on the line.”

Hyuga entered the communication protocol of the old Eva-0.0. “Go ahead.”

“I forgot to ask earlier, but how is Lilith? You wouldn’t like it if she came over here, would you, Kaji-kun?”

There was a slight pause before Kaji responded. <<No need to worry. Lilith has already settled on the new world. Though the yolk and the white of the egg might be switched out, the embryo remains the same.>>

Ultimately, Seele’s goal would serve humanity.

The visor they found in the basement of a church in Cyprus, where Chairman Keel’s soul slept.

The soul that should not have reawakened in this world on the brink of the apocalypse.

Kaji’s will had fused with Seele’s when he put the visor on, and there was one thing Seele wanted: to observe the fickle system of Armaros and his messengers, and to make sure that they didn’t break until the next iteration of the Human Instrumentality Project wiped out what was left of humanity.

With Seele’s soul fused to Kaji, his next destination would be Lilith’s side.

Goodbye…Ryoji. Let’s do this.

Misato grabbed the receiver on the console.

“Six, let Quatre through. Do not attack.”

<<Uh…Six here. S-sure…>>

“Trois, you are to hand over the replica Longinus to Quatre, but do not leave the Glass Egg. Understood?”

<<I cannot comply with this plan,>> Trois said. <<Even if there were some way to return…>>

"Trois, you are to hand over the replica Longinus
to Quatre, but do not leave the Glass Egg."

《I cannot comply with this plan.》 ■

Trois understood that Misato was ready to part with Kaji.

<<Wha?!>>

An arm grabbed Six's Eva-0.0 Type-F and flung her to the side.

A pillar of water shot out of the ground. Quatre's mutant Eva stepped out of it instead of Six.

<<Guess who went through a hole in the ground to get from HQ to Lake Ashi?>>

<<That would be me.>>

Quatre had passed through the flooded underground using a passage Six had opened up with the Angel's Backbone. The mutant Eva made her way to the surface. She stepped to the entrance, wary of any bullets that might come her way, but the opening of the egg forced her into a crouch, leaving her defenseless.

She spotted Dr. Ibuki Maya inside. Trois' gamma-ray laser cannon was the perfect weapon for barricading herself, but she could no longer fire it due to the wide area of effect it had. That would be as bad as stepping on the chief of science and engineering. Instead, Trois armed herself with the Longinus.

<<Hand it over, Trois,>> Rei Quatre said.

Trois took a step back to avoid stabbing Quatre as she came through the cramped opening. <<Even if all goes well, you might not make it back, Quatre.>>

<<No matter. I've been tainted by Armaros' scale and betrayed Nerv as a result. At this point, I hate the world we live in.>> She was now inside the egg.

<<Quatre, I've always felt that you're more alive than I am.>>

Quatre took another step forward, close enough now that the prongs of the Longinus replica brushed against her Eva's chest. Trois immediately stepped back.

Quatre stepped forward again. <<And I feel that you misunderstand the concept of living!>>

The A.T. Field-encased black wings of the mutant Eva flapped open to cover Trois' line of sight. Quatre already had one hand on the spear.

< < Six, get Dr. Ibuki out of here! > > Quatre called out, making Maya finally notice the precarious position she was in.

The giants stepped around the construction decks and ran for the entrance. Overhead, Quatre's Eva pulled the spear closer to herself.

< < It irritates me to see someone with my face think that she's allowed to die or be sacrificed. As Ayanami Reis, our personalities have become irreplaceable. > >

Six switched the Angel's Backbone to the weapon's free-joint mode, and she neatly coiled it up so that Maya could ride on her bayonet. They got out of there, but Trois was still holding on to the lance.

< < I do not plan on sacrificing myself. Ikari-kun picked a color for me. I am going to look for clothes to suit that color, to find *myself* so I can suit that color. I have no intention of dying before then. > >

< < In that case… > > Quatre shifted her momentum and pushed the lance back. Trois lost her balance, and her Eva tumbled forward from the shift in her center of gravity. Quatre crouched, scooping Trois up as she fell.

< < Give it to me! > >

Trois' Eva rolled all the way from the entrance to the outside of the egg, letting go of the lance.

"Let's begin."

"What kind of a silly ritual was that?"

Kaji arose within Quatre's plug. It mattered little to him what she did.

< < It'll be the same regardless of who does it. > >

Seele saw Ayanamis Rei and Trois as nothing more than puppets of Ikari Gendo, fashioned after his wife for the completion of the Human Instrumentality Project. They were all the same.

And yet we have our differences.

Quatre giggled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Was I actually proud of myself for a second there?

She felt as if there was an A.T. Field that spread from her abdomen to her chest and all the way to her arms.

The helix of the replica Longinus swelled, emitting light from the inside.

“So, what is this lance?”

“The spear form of the Longinus has a simple enough function. It can join and sever causality. Even Lilith, that being that creates life indefinitely, would stop if this were driven through her.”

“Causality?”

“Every effect has a road leading up to it. This shell is connected to the inside of the egg underneath Yomotsu Hirasaka.”

The Q.R. Signum in the mutant Eva’s chest began to throb.

“Urk!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Armaros…noticed that I’m holding the spear. She’s looking for…”

Blood rushed through her neck, making her veins pop and pulse. It looked black, but perhaps that was an illusion caused by her pale skin.

Her hair, tinted silver by the initial corruption of the Q.R. Signum, now turned black as well. Her left hand let go of the control stick of its own accord, and Quatre had to hold it down with her right hand to stop it.

There was no record of Q.R. Signums taking over a person’s bodily functions, even when they were mentally infected. This might be a first. The Euro Eva had been built around one of Armaros’ scales. Many had speculated how Armaros would use this feature. Now they had their answer.

“Heh heh heh.” Quatre strained to laugh, but she was satisfied. She knew she’d made the black giant desperate if it was reduced to such measures.

Kaji got up. “Let me out and I can interfere with the Q.R. Signum for you. It should alleviate your pain.”

“Look… The space around us is changing. It’s like the sunset…” An Ayanami memory.

While the two eggs hadn't switched places, they *had* begun overlapping in the strange twilight. Seele/Kaji stepped out onto the chest of the mutant Eva and touched the Q.R. Signum to prevent it from being taken over by Armaros.

There were thousands of figures in the distance.

Gendo's minions from three years ago.

Ikari must be among them.

Will I rely on you, even in the next world?

Seeker, if only you would abandon your karma. You, too, could have become Seele…

Kaji realized too late that someone was standing behind him.

<<You did your best, but it wasn't enough.>>

He turned. Rei Cinque—in an old school uniform and carrying Rei Quatre—stood before him.

<<Take her home.>>

"H-hey!"

Kaji took Quatre, but Seele inside him was distressed.

What is happening?

Now unburdened, Cinque turned around and touched the Q.R. Signum with her right hand.

THRUM!

The black scale pulsed. Its countless veins glowed red. And then, it shattered.

"What?!" Seele/Kaji was shocked.

"Yui!" Ikari Gendo, former commander of Nerv, called out and ran after her.

When Kaji turned to look again, Ayanami Rei Cinque had aged several years and was wearing a white lab coat. She was now Ikari Yui.

Seele/Kaji's vision went dark. The next moment, he was in a different place entirely, holding Quatre. Everything was orange twilight, and he could still hear the hum of the mutant Eva behind him. They were somewhere inside the egg.

He looked ahead.

“Ooooh!”

Mist flowed at their feet, flowing toward and pooling around Lilith.

The white and swollen source of all life was nailed to the cross.

She would take whatever data was in the Ark, go to the moon, and continue to produce life. The Earth would wither and become the next moon. The swollen moon would become the new Earth.

The Seele within Kaji felt reassured that his mission in this world was coming to an end.

Fruits will grow even if you neglect the tree.

Given time, humanity would fail the same way, over and over.

The Human Instrumentality Project had been imposed on humans as a product of original sin, and unless they completed it, they would never progress to the next stage. The best thing to do was finish it quickly.

Seele had guarded the memory of the world ever since the time of the first Noah. Though they’d never attained success, they’d kept the record of all the failures.

The world had no blueprint.

All they could do was eliminate one failure at a time.

They were the ones who’d learned how to interfere with the messengers. They were the ones who’d crafted the Ark to shorten the creation of new worlds. They were the ones who’d created a replica of the original Lance of Longinus.

Seele/Kaji looked at Lilith.

What was the entity imposing the Human Instrumentality Project?

Whatever it was, it had abandoned the world.

No…perhaps it was still present. Perhaps it had chosen to keep its silence for all eternity. Indeed, perhaps it had forgotten its original plan and now had nothing left to say.

Such was the eternal question that had haunted humanity from the dawn of time.

<<My God, are you with us?>>

He took a step toward Lilith.

Then Kaji noticed something twisting around his legs in the mist, like it was trying to pull him down.

Lilith's cross was planted in his watermelon patch. Type-N monitoring robots, stained with water and moss, scurried about with their creaky crawlers, watering the plants with a hose.

It was no hallucination. Little Rei Six had moved Shinji's patch inside the Glass Egg. It was looking pretty good by now. The striped green spheres glowed beautifully under the orange light.

Seele/Kaji knelt in the black soil, Rei Quatre still in his arms.

Shinji's watermelon patch. It had been Kaji's once.

What is this…feeling?

Something fell from Kaji's face and bounced onto the watermelon vines. Kaji Ryoji's existence had been overwritten ever since he'd found Chairman Keel's visor in Cyprus.

Now, the visor hit the ground and rolled away.

"Yui!"

Gendo desperately called out to the figure standing on the mutant Eva.

The woman smiled lovingly back at him.

<<My dear, sweet Gendo.>>

The prongs of the replica Longinus still glowed in the mutant Eva's hands. Yui was standing on its shoulder.

<<You will keep chasing me despite having lost all reason to. You will exist only to pursue karma in the distant world.>>

The Carrier wings of the mutant Eva crumbled away. It began to grow bigger. The S² engine on its back cried like a baby as it was separated from its body and then calmed as it was cradled in a newly synthesized right hand.

<<You will be stripped of everything that makes you yourself, until you become like a single, slender arrow. Like the me you see right now.>>

The S² engine turned into an egg, and the being that cradled it was no longer an Eva, but Yui's bare and radiant body.

“Will we become one, then?”

<<You are to follow me from a place only you are able. That is the rule imposed upon you and no one else.>>

The giant of light no longer resembled Yui.

The replica Longinus was glowing now, and she pushed its shining tip into the walls of the egg.

The light consumed everything.

<<We shall meet again in a future iteration of the Human Instrumentality Project.>>

《We shall meet again in a future iteration of the Human Instrumentality Project.》 ■

Back in Hakone, the invincible shell of the Glass Egg cracked, bringing the Chronostatic Sphere, the sealed-off world Lilith had created three years ago at HQ, back into existence.

The ground under Tokyo-3 shook.

The vertical structure that was old Central Dogma materialized, landing sideways on the shores of Lake Ashi.

Shinji…

He felt someone call out to him and turned to face it.

"Ah!"

Shinji had returned to Yomotsu Hirasaka and was greeted by the sight of a mushroom cloud, rising up through the roots of the World Tree and reaching the stratosphere. Shock waves rippled out, causing the foundations of the world to wobble. Then a pillar of flame shot straight up through the mushroom cloud itself. Sound followed sight, and the eruption was so loud that it knocked Eva-01 Final Model back.

Black smoke billowed. It broke through the clouds, bursting into an aurora when it penetrated the ionosphere. It flew up into the Earth's low orbit, and the sun and moon illuminated it, shining over a sky that had been colored by the roots of the World Tree.

A single point of light exited the cloud. It looked like a sphere. No, an egg.

Realization dawned on Shinji.

Yomotsu Hirasaka had released Lilith's Chronostatic Sphere into the sky, into the moon.

Final Model raced after it. With Lilith gone, Earth was no longer the stage for the Human Instrumentality Project. The planet had lost its reason for existing. He spread his wings of light and accelerated into the heavens.

"The old HQ is inside that thing…along with it Ritsuko-san and Father!"

<<It will be all right.>>

A distant voice came from the other side of the World Tree's network of roots.

Final Model stopped in his tracks. The wings of light he'd activated at the cost of his life span melted into particles in the sky.

Mother?

The shores of Lake Ashi, where the world from three years ago lay on its side. Figures, one after another, stepped out of the dusty rubble. People who'd disappeared three years ago reappeared, looking no older than when they'd vanished.

Nerv Japan and JSSDF's joint rescue team escorted the bewildered-looking crowd. Both civilian and political rescue squads were exempt from the operation, since they were still under emergency lockdown.

Kaji, too, appeared from the rubble, Rei Quatre on his back and two watermelons in his hands. Misato shot out of the black SUV and ran toward him.

"'Sup."

"You look like a hot mess."

"I couldn't let that melon patch go to waste. That thing's on the moon now."

Kaji motioned with his chin. Behind him, the Nerv crew each carried a watermelon or two.

"I'm so tired."

Nerv's former commander, Ikari Gendo, had also made it out, but he'd been injured by the crumbling scrap heap. He'd lost consciousness and was moved onto a stretcher and into an ambulance that carried him away, sirens blaring.

On the other side of the scene, Akagi Ritsuko consoled Maya, who was bawling into her chest.

Misato wasted no time in issuing orders to the rescue team.

"Find out where everyone's from and put tags on them. Keep all of them under surveillance. Put them on the Togendai linear rail and move them to the shelter inside HQ. You can part with JSSDF there."

As much as Misato wanted to talk to Ritsuko, this was what she needed to do for the moment. "I'm going back to the command center."

"How about some watermelons before you go?"

“We’re still under a Class One Threat. Our kids are still fighting out there, one on the Pacific and another right over our heads! Also—”

Huh?

Misato paused.

Why am I talking to him so naturally?

Kaji read Misato’s mind. “Oh, Seele was inside the sphere, too. They’re blasted to the moon now.”

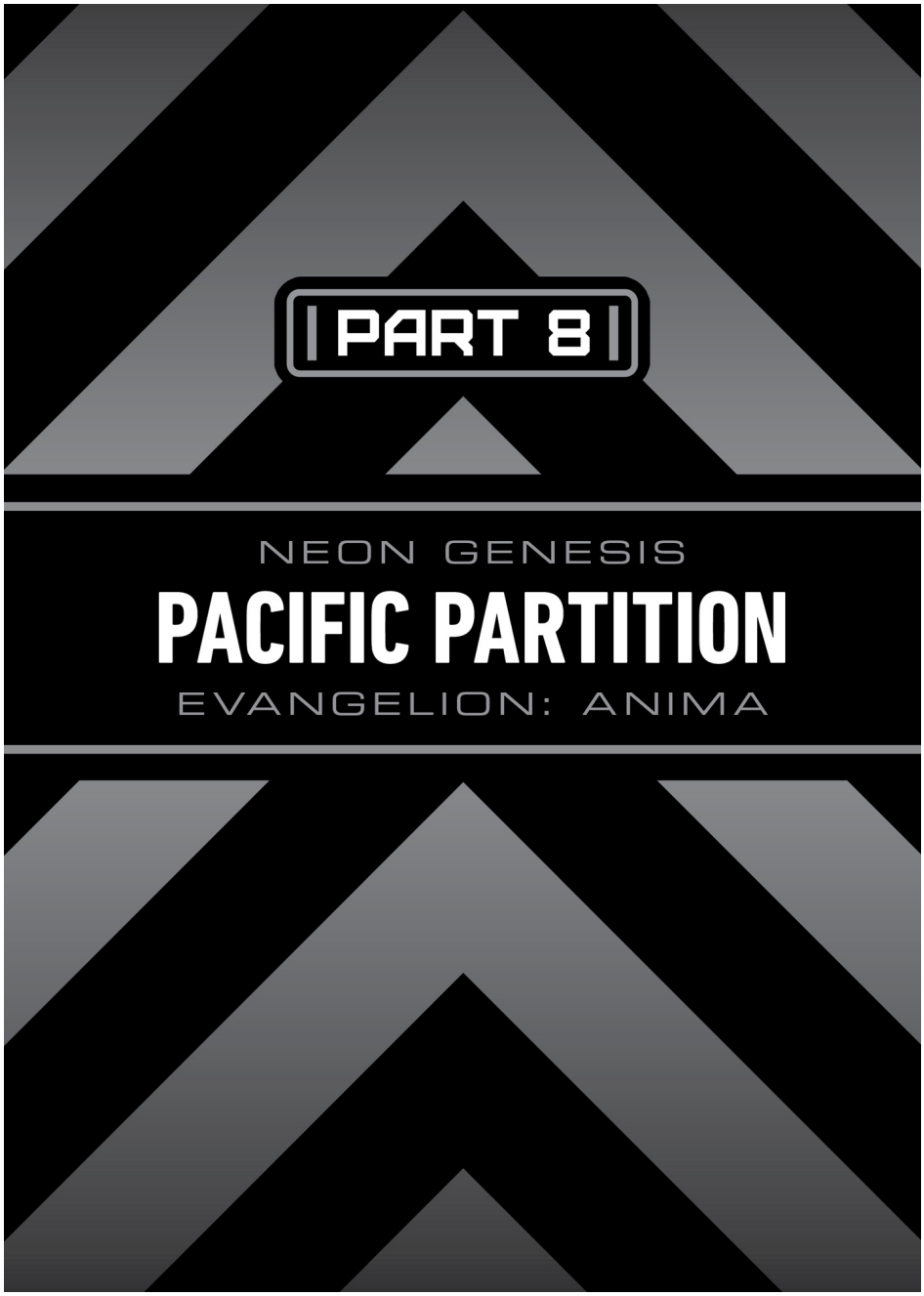
Misato froze, her expression blank, her hand still holding the open door of the SUV. It flustered him, and he looked away, adjusting the sleeping Quatre on his back.

“Probably.”

“Uh-huh.”

Misato fought back the tears. “I already said my goodbyes to you.”

“You’re an awful woman, you know that?”


PART 8
NEON GENESIS
PACIFIC PARTITION
EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 48:
Mari's Assault

THE ERUPTION HAD LAUNCHED Lilith's Chronostatic Sphere into the sky. Fortunately, the ash and debris were light enough to be carried away by the wind to the southern part of the island, giving the North American Alliance a chance to regroup.

Overhead, a volcanic bomb the size of a bus collided with something and shattered. The JSSDF Akashima and Shrikes One and Two, along with the American attack platforms, generated repulsor fields using their N_2 reactors. Furthermore, the Brazilian engineering unit activated twelve of the N_2 warheads reserved for destroying the Ark.

But the Ark provided whoever looked at it with a veritable hellscape. It continued to produce black monsters that pursued the troops despite all their resistance. The creatures rushed to the lava that flowed like molten candy.

The troops continued to lay suppressing fire. But how long would their ammunition last?

A huge, clawed foot stepped over the burning orange river. An equally large tail cast its shadow over them like a mountain.

"Stop! Hold your fire! That might be the mutated U.S. Eva Nerv Japan told us about!"

The ground shook as the beast landed on all fours, the trees rustling as it rushed forward.

"That's Wolfpack?!"

"So, the Unknown Mountain Beast spotted by our UAVs… That thing's an Eva?!"

"So, the Unknown Mountain Beast spotted by our UAVs... ■
That thing's an Eva?!"

"Hold your fire!"
■

The U.S. Eva sent out its pack. Animal-shaped A.T. Fields came charging out of the beast. They began consuming the black shadows that had overrun the area.

"That's Wolfpack, all right! It's the only Eva that uses its A.T. Field like that!"

"She's one of ours!"

Mari no longer considered herself affiliated with the U.S. troops. She wasn't even concerned with the well-being of the human troopers on the ground. All she wanted to do was consume the Ark's life-form data to feed her pack. But the soldiers, abandoned by their convoy and fighting an unspeakable enemy, were inspired by her nonetheless.

<<Behind the beast! They're coming in hot!>>

Four Angel Carriers pursued Wolfpack.

"Don't let them get her!"

The railgun mounted on the heavy trailers let loose a volley of fire, and the troopers took up a defensive formation.

Torwächter Kodama and Torwächter Toji came swooping down from the sky, hanging from the roots.

Shinji was listening to Six elaborate on the launch of Lilith's sphere.

"Are you sure about this?!"

<<Yeah! Everyone locked inside made it back to Hakone! Even Commander Ikari and Dr. Akagi!>>

"And you're absolutely sure?"

Shinji had been about to pursue the sphere, which he'd thought contained his father and many others. Now he felt his anxiety ease.

Thank God.

<<Anyway, Asuka told you to do something about Toji.>>

Final Model cleared the smoke.

"Mari?!"

Shinji had gone through a wall of ash, and he thought he saw Wolfpack over a distant mountain ridge. The two Torwächters pursued

her, dancing like puppets dangling from strings.

<<Toji!>>

Chapter 49:
Hakone

TROIS HAD RETURNED to Cage Two—Shinji's cage—instead of Cage One, and was currently in the process of forcing Super Eva's shoulder pylons into Eva-0.0.

"Urgh!"

She grimaced with pain as she drove the pylon's anchor into her shoulder. This kind of work required high levels of precision and would usually be conducted with a positioning gantry with the Eva in a pilotless and dormant state.

But she was running out of time and couldn't wait for permission to be granted. She checked her synchronization rate through squinted eyes, beads of sweat forming on her face, only to be lost in the flow of the LCL.

<<Trois, what are you doing?!>> Hyuga barked from the command center.

Trois paid no heed to him, went to the third tier of the arming tree, and equipped herself with the Field Penetrators Kesara and Basara.

"I'm going after Unit Two."

<<Stand down, Eva-0.0,>> Fuyutsuki said. <<You are not to operate without orders issued from Command.>>

"Asuka can't face Armaros on her own, even if she *is* synthesized."

The ground rumbled as Trois' Eva stepped into the lift deck.

"Epicenter!" Fuyutsuki leaned against the edge of the console for support and shouted to Aoba's subordinate on the lower deck who was in charge of meteorology.

"Detecting several epicenters! Sending it to the main display now!"

And yet, the screen showed the sky instead of the Earth. There was another planet on the far side of the roots, a planet that was also entangled by them. The moon. The former satellite had swollen to the

point that it was now only ten thousand kilometers away from the Earth.

“It’s falling, and fast! It’s causing massive tidal disturbances all over the Earth!”

The command center erupted.

“We’ve been close enough to feel its effects before, but not like this. Why now?!”

“Nothing in geophysics or planetology can explain it,” Aoba’s lecturer, the aging theoretical physicist, said. “This is the appropriate physical reaction to the relation of mass between the two bodies. If anything, the gravitational pull we had before this was preposterous. Something interfered with it.”

“Base isolation systems back online!” someone in the damage control unit shouted.

They’d finished repairing the damage done to HQ by Quatre’s mutant Eva. Their operation jacks were pulled out, and the rumbling in the command center settled.

Outside, the quake continued.

“What do you mean by ‘something,’ professor?” Fuyutsuki asked. The elderly man scratched at his receding hairline.

“I think it’s because we lost the Longinus Ring.”

Fuyutsuki didn’t understand what this meant. The Lance of Longinus had been constricting the Earth from orbit. Was it also controlling the ever-expanding moon?

“It’s only a hypothesis. If the exchange of matter between Earth and moon are interrupted, the moon would cease to be the stage of the new Earth. They would need something to control that process.”

The Lance of Longinus was currently flying through the roots of the World Tree, spread out over the Earth and moon.

“I guess the lance’s disappearance didn’t solve our problems.”

Misato entered the command center—noisy with the whir of construction tools—with Kaji in tow.

<<External cameras!>>

Alarms blared from the observatories surrounding the Komagatake

sniping post. Black ash scattered from the sky, peeling off the surface of the vertical roots.

"Open fire, Katsuragi!" Kaji whispered urgently. "Those are the same things as the black creatures from the sea!"

You're kidding! Misato thought.

"Arm the anti-air guns!"

"Magi, assign the fire control A.I. in the armory to simultaneous suppression of multiple targets per turret."

<<Understood.>>

Having issued the order, Fuyutsuki looked at Misato and then at Kaji. Could he really trust her decision?

This man was possessed by Seele, by the shadow of Chairman Keel.

Fuyutsuki couldn't believe him so easily.

"The roots of the World Tree are probably connected to the Ark on Yomotsu Hirasaka, Fuyutsuki-sensei," Kaji tapped the side of his head.

Did he retain the memories of Seele?

"Only the parts they consciously thought about," Kaji said, as if reading his mind.

Anti-air guns fired from the armory.

"They'll fade soon enough. They aren't exactly alive and only know how to eat…but you should still warn the rest of the world."

It was as Kaji said. The black shadows descended from the roots, consuming everything—plant, animal, and person—in sight.

The world was thrown into chaos, the air filled with crying and wailing.

Within the roots that covered the sky, Armaros and the Asuka/Eva synthesis continued to do battle, their silhouettes undulating along the stem.

<<Take care of this place, Six,>> Rei Trois said.

Six's Eva-0.0 Type-F was currently shooting down the descending black shadows.

"What?!"

She turned and saw Trois' Eva-0.0—armed with the Field Penetrators Kesara and Basara, a rifle, an N_2 grenade launcher, and the gamma-ray laser cannon—fly away with her external jump boosters.

<<Quatre erased my memory of the warp procedure, but with the tunnel network clearly visible…>>

The orange body, flanked with boosters on four sides, leaped toward the tips of the dangling roots of the World Tree.

"You're kidding!"

The icon for Trois' Eva-0.0 disappeared from the combat link.

<<I can't communicate using ordinary means, but with our tin can telephone… You can hear me, can't you, Six?>>

Trois' connection had dropped out, but she could still speak through the mental mirroring that connected the Ayanamis.

<<I'll need you to speak for me.>>

Misato and the others still didn't know that the mirror link had been reestablished. Six pictured the moment she would break the news…and their response to it. She squeezed the trigger on the Powered 8, her mood visibly soured.

"I guess I'm the one getting yelled at today."

Chapter 50:
A Wolf's Wisdom

YOMOTSU HIRASAKA ISLAND.

The U.S. Eva, Wolfpack, charged in a straight line. Its destination, the Ark, lay in the shade of a mighty rock. Wolfpack cut through the tentacle of an Angel Carrier that carried Shamshel, and it easily avoided the Torwächters projectiles.

The Ark.

The key to repeating the world.

The congregation of all terrestrial life-forms.

The data of all organisms on Earth.

Both the Earth and moon possessed an Ark of their own. The two had originally been one, but they'd been severed from each other, suddenly invincible and incorporeal. Without a physical existence, they could only deteriorate for all eternity.

But something had affected them.

When Asuka and Eva-02 had come into contact with the Ark on the moon, they'd not only lost their egos but their physical shape as well, from the amount of life-form data that had flowed into them. When they failed to shed this excess data, the Asuka/Eva synthesis was formed.

But for Mari, becoming an amalgamated mass of genetic material was her ideal. She'd once referred to the incomplete life-forms of the Ark as a pitiful pack. They'd been sealed away for eternity, their only task to accelerate the regeneration of the world.

She felt sorry for them.

Mari's Wolfpack advanced to the Ark, intent on setting the countless life-forms free. She didn't know whether she'd be able to. But she was no longer human enough to form a plan.

The girl now operated on the level of a beast.

“Go! Destroy that damn mirror box!”

The North American Alliance urged Wolfpack on.

Torwächter Kodama and Torwächter Toji had acted separately so far, but they changed their tactics when Wolfpack crossed the final hill to the Ark. They lined up perfectly, surrounding it, and touched their back plates, which had become elastic slings hanging from the sky roots. They separated, producing an oblong window to another dimension.

“Focus fire on the two black units!” Warrant Officer Endo shouted.

He trusted his gut, but it was too late.

The two Torwächters spread their window like finish-line tape and dashed right into Wolfpack’s giant body. The beast’s front paws were lopped off with little resistance, the connective tissue limbs transported by the window.

The two Torwächters spread their window
like finish-line tape.■

Wolfpack fell forward, shaking the ground hard enough to flip tanks. It took ages for the tremors to subside.

Mari's charge had been halted with the Ark in her sights.

<<Gaaah… Aaaagh!>>

The fallen behemoth clawed at the trees with its hind legs, growling in Mari's voice.

Torwächter Kodama and Torwächter Toji descended, their window still open. They would finish the job.

The North American Alliance and the Akashima were still firing at the Angel Carriers, too busy to help Mari.

"Stop it, Toji!"

Shinji's Final Model appeared, knife in hand, half of his body glowing.

Chapter 51:
Inside the Tunnel Network

INSIDE THE ROOTS of the World Tree, pitch-black winds blew Trois' Eva-0.0 through the tunnel network. She'd used this highway before when her body was controlled by Seele/Kaji.

Even with a chunk of missing memory, Rei Trois knew that using the tunnel network was a matter of will. Places were only distant if you *thought* of them as distant. With no goal in mind, you'd wander the roots forever.

I need to catch up with Asuka and Armaros.

She'd barely formed an image of them when she arrived at her destination. She saw a black giant fighting against a red, feminine one.

"Safety off."

The FCS made an inquiry about the focal length of her beam's convergence point. Distance seemed to operate under vague rules in this place.

"Set distance at infinity. Cancel auto-identification of individuals. Use my line of sight to aim."

The A.I. popped up a number of windows warning Trois about the dangers of friendly fire, but she dismissed them all.

The gamma-ray laser charged its capacitors to their limits to output a shot with the power of 2,100 gigawatts.

The Asuka/Eva synthesis leaped away. The mass of energy failed to focus itself on one point, perhaps due to the properties of the space, and the bright ray grazed Armaros' right side and head. Most of the energy was deflected by her shields, but it managed to blow half her face away.

<<Aaah! It burns! It hurts!>> The black giant screamed in Hikari's voice.

<<Where is it… Where is the spear?!>> Now it was Armaros speaking through Hikari.

The keeper of the Human Instrumentality Project was looking for the original Lance of Longinus after losing its replica. The fact that she'd yet to find it might have had something to do with Asuka distracting her will.

<<Where is it? I must put…the spear back into the sky!>>

Fused with Eva-02, Asuka was close to losing her ego again, but the cries of her best friend still pierced her heart.

<<Hi…ka…ri…>>

Trois rushed into the fight, her right hand drawing Basara from her left shoulder.

"You have to come back to us, Horaki-san! Asuka, Suzuhara… even Ikari-kun. They're all hurting for you."

Armaros brandished her hatchet-like melee weapon. Trois ducked, turned, and swung.

"And the same goes for me!"

Sparks flew from Armaros' shielded chest. Trois used the momentum from her rotation to sheathe Basara after the strike. The sword cases turned red as they consumed energy from her external S^2 engine. The Field Penetrators analyzed the characteristics of Armaros' shield and began firing up the field excitation blades of Kesara-Basara.

However, the dedicated sub-A.I. estimated the penetration ability of the blades to be at thirty-five percent after attunement. While she could break through the shield, she wouldn't be able to chop off any limbs. Trois skimmed through the data.

Her entire body is covered with Q.R. Signums, each with its own unique shield signature. They're resonating.

Asuka attacked from behind the black giant with the Bizen Osafune, but Armaros had anticipated this move and blocked it with the hatchet. She wanted to save Hikari and was focusing too much on the entry unit as a result.

"Asuka, if we don't incapacitate her first…!"

<<I…know…>>

Trois switched to her rifle as she waited for Kesara-Basara to finish forging.

<<Why won't you…help me…Asuka…>>

Asuka flinched and steadied the Bizen.

Armaros used this chance to spread her arms in the dark flow. Who knew what she was thinking now?

< <Must…advance to the next… > >

“Advance? Advance what?”

< <The world… > >

Armaros thrust out her right arm.

It vanished.

Trois and Asuka were equally shocked.

What is she doing?

It looked like an optical illusion. Armaros’ gigantic body became even bigger.

< <I’ll take everything from here… Toji…Kodama…come. > >

Chapter 52:
Pacific Partition

YOMOTSU HIRASAKA ISLAND.

Shinji blocked Torwächter Toji's spinning spindle with his glowing hand.

"You have to stop, Toji!"

Meanwhile, Torwächter Kodama circled over to the twitching Wolfpack to lop off its head.

What should I do?!

The American attack platforms fended off Torwächter Kodama's attack by focusing their gatling guns on it.

Shinji was being forced into melee combat, and he prepared himself accordingly.

But then he was caught off guard.

Toji's Torwächter rushed him, flinging the physically superior Final Model over his head. Toji was good at judo, and it was paying off deadly dividends now.

"Urgh!"

Torwächter Toji grabbed the Powered 8 at his waist.

Crap!

The railgun folded its acceleration barrel into a compact figure eight, opened fire, and shot down a flying platform intercepting Torwächter Kodama. Its pilot and gunner crawled out of the wreckage and looked up, only to see even stranger things in the sky.

"Look! The tip of the roots!"

The roots, which had been floating aimlessly before, were stabbing the Earth one after another.

"The tips are turning into black arms. There's more of them coming down!"

"Focus on the roots! Take them down!"

The remnants of the North American Alliance got to work, their fighting spirit restored after seeing this new threat. Their cannons had been level with the ground to fend off Torwächters, Angel Carriers, and black monsters spawning from the Ark. But now they pointed up. Ships coming in from Saipan Island to replace the convoy also provided supporting fire.

But the roots raining down from the sky kept piercing the ground.

“What the hell are those things?! They look like Armaros’ arms.”

It was as if the Earth were being held in place by anchors that fell from heaven.

“Whoa!”

Final Model tumbled again, riddled with the 8’s high-speed rounds. Most of the bullets were melted away by his field, but pain still coursed through his body. Still, two of his pylons were destroyed, and his restraint armor was heavily damaged.

He’d underestimated Toji. His A.T. Field didn’t work well against an opponent he knew.

“Stop it! Please…Toji!”

He slashed at the air with his knife. But the next attack didn’t come.

The two Torwächters disappeared into the roots that covered the sky.

Screams rent the air as everyone lost their balance. The whole island was being pulled westward. The Akashima hovered over the battlefield, until a mountainside rammed into it.

“What was that?!”

Endo would’ve been gravely injured if he weren’t strapped into his seat. The Akashima wasn’t moving; the rest of the landscape was.

“This isn’t your regular tectonic plate shift!”

You didn’t have to be a geophysicist to know that much. The screaming continued from down below.

<<This is Ogasawara front line to Yomo…Tsukino Yami Island. Akashima, we’re seeing some crazy things over here.>> Lieutenant

Colonel Kasuga contacted them from the JSSDF base at Chichijima. <<Endo, the island is currently being dragged west by the roots in the sky!>>

Warrant Office Endo balked at this statement, but a quick look at his map confirmed his superior's mad claim.

They're dragging us west, all right. And then…what, are we going all the way to Okinawa?!

"Lieutenant Colonel, we might ram right into the Ogasawara Islands at this point!"

<<No,>> Kasuga shot back. <<That island won't reach here. The Earth's rotation has been thrown off significantly. Right now, Tsukino Yami is headed north-northwest by previous calculations.>>

Pillars of fire erupted out of the sea, following the island's trail.

Endo checked his map. "Izu Peninsula? Oh, no…"

Yomotsu Hirasaka had fallen right into the Earth's mantle from orbit. It was now cutting through the ocean floor like a knife, its destination its original landing spot before Shinji had diverted its trajectory—the place that lay just beyond Izu Peninsula, Hakone.

A bulge appeared on one section of the primary roots. It traveled down, growing larger and larger, so that by the time it reached the Atlantic Ocean, it had become a giant whose feet could touch the Earth.

Armaros had taken the roots of the World Tree into herself, growing to the size of the giants of light who would cause the Final Impact. She was a pitch-black giant of darkness.

Her arms sprouted from her shoulders into many fine branches, twisting around the roots of the World Tree. She continued westward until she reached the east coast of the United States. Then she began moving northeast, toward the Arctic Ocean.

The branching arms started weaving together, forming a single arm. In the distant Pacific, the roots pulling Yomotsu Hirasaka formed the second arm.

Shinji pursued Toji and the other Torwächter, but he couldn't ignore the Carriers attacking him. As he fought off the giants, he witnessed the moment the roots came together to form two giant arms.

Chapter 53:
Black Giant

"It's heading to Hakone? You're kidding, Misato-san."

<<If only I were.>>

"This is crazy. You can't just pull something against the Earth's rotation. Even before it shrank, the Earth could rotate forty thousand kilometers in twenty-four hours, which comes down to… Uhh…"

<<1670 kilometers per hour, give or take a few. It's faster now, with our decreased diameter.>>

"They'd have to break the sound barrier to do that!"

Shinji didn't feel its effects. He didn't fall after accelerating. The winds were a little stronger, but even then…

He swallowed hard when he saw the island's peak. It was indeed being pulled away by a gigantic, spindle-shaped cloud.

The two Platypus-2 observer jets, Shrikes One and Two, flew high above the ocean, where they were in no danger of colliding with the vertical roots. Their observation booms and rotary guns were tucked tightly into the fuselage, and they watched the scene unfold while flying at high speed.

<<Either way, it's the truth. At this rate, it's going to ram into Izu Peninsula in about an hour.>>

Shinji couldn't believe what he was hearing. "And the moon?"

Professor Mizusato answered his question in a hoarse voice. <<With the disappearance of the Longinus Ring, the Earth is on a crash course. Taking the Roche limit into account, both bodies will clash, affecting a third of the area on each. It'll be like chafing pants on a hot summer's day.>>

"Chafing… What?"

Shinji didn't understand, but he knew it would be catastrophic.

<<It just means the countdown party's happening sooner rather than later. Shinji, you'll have to—>>

Another earthquake shook Hakone, and Misato's window flickered before being cut off. Her courage wasn't just for show. Shinji knew she had to be brave for everyone else.

It hurt to watch her.

Misato didn't blame him. Not that Shinji was at fault. But he *was* the one who'd manifested the tunnel network, the roots of the World Tree, into this dimension. The roots were supposed to be invisible, but they'd swallowed the Lance of Longinus when they appeared, and now the moon was falling on their heads. The roots had become part of Armaros, and she was currently dragging Yomotsu Hirasaka all the way to Hakone.

There was only one thing left to do.

And he had to do it while he was still human.

"If I'm doing this at all…now's the time."

He'd known that much the moment he saw the giant's black arm.

Resistance was—

The battleship *Yamato* had landed on the west side of the moving island. The ship provided support at medium range as well as supplies from Nerv Japan. At the ship's rear deck, Shinji's Final Model unlatched the Battle Axe SRM-50.

Chapter 54:
Classroom

While earthquakes ravaged Hakone, Six was locked in combat with a Carrier of the double-helix Angel Armisael. She was currently being assaulted by the Carrier's hardened spiral rings. She managed to block them with the whip form of the Angel's Backbone. But a chill ran down her spine as she looked east.

"That quake just now… It can't be!"

Something was cutting former Izu Peninsula in half. The island had been divided by a road of sorts. On the horizon, two black arms extended from the sky, as if pulling the thing.

Six looked west. A gigantic black shadow had fallen over Mount Fuji and the Sea of Japan. Its armored lower half walked under the roots, but its top half extended high above and was covered by them.

"No…I hate this." Blood rushed to her head. "Trois!"

<<I see it, Six. Armaros has expanded to the point of being visible outside the tunnel network. We can only see her chest from here.>>

"What should we do?"

<<I'm sorry, but I'm a little preoccupied.>>

Six saw through Trois' eyes. Within the dark corridors, Armaros' body was so large that it felt like she was seeing it through a magnifying glass. Meanwhile, Torwächter Toji and Torwächter Kodama, fashioned after Hikari's sister, were coming at her. They'd been summoned into the tunnel network to deal with Trois' Eva-0.0 and the Asuka/Eva synthesis, Crimson A1.

Six felt dizzy, like her little head was filled to its brim.

"This is crazy… Marmaros is huge now, and its arms are dragging Yomoyomo Island all the way to Hakone."

<<It's what?!>>

"I don't know anymore!"

An alert came from Hakone command as she let out an exasperated scream.

< <Hakone command to Six! You're falling into a commercial-residential area! Take evasive maneuvers! > >

The Eva didn't have enough space to accelerate and crashed into something on the ground. Or it would have, anyway, if it hadn't bounced away from that something.

CRASH!

Eva-0.0 Type-F was stranded in the city, leaning against an invisible wall as the Angel Carrier approached the urban combat area. Six ejected her entry plug, but the hatch didn't open. The outer plating was caught against some kind of tube.

"Ungh!"

She pulled the offending debris out of the small crack. The hatch opened properly now, and the small pilot rolled out of the plug right into—no, *through*—the invisible wall.

"This is…the school."

Six dragged herself into the classroom. As usual, Super Eva's entry plug was in the center of it.

"Shinji, let everyone into the school! Nothing can destroy your dream—the Eva's dream—right?!" Six activated the hatch opener on the adjacent desk.

< <Six? I don't mind, but I'm about to…everyone…after… > >

"What? You're breaking up!"

Six couldn't wait for the slow-opening hatch. She stood on the tips of her toes and smacked the surface of the plug with her little hands.

"Urgh!"

She squeezed her head through the crack like a cat.

But what she found inside was an empty seat in a darkened plug.

She knew she'd heard his voice earlier.

But Shinji wasn't here.

“Huh? What gives? We could always meet at the school!”

Shinji’s Final Model still existed in this world because he’d frozen the final second of Third Impact. Now he only had one foot in this world—no, a mere toenail.

Final Model’s internal clock was nearing its end. As a result, Shinji could no longer leave it.

The Shinji in the classroom was part of a dream. That was why Six’s Eva had bounced off the impenetrable barrier of the school. The dream wasn’t bound by natural physics. As such, it was a strange place. Asuka had brought Shinji’s entry plug here. Shinji had managed to get inside the Eva from here. And Final Model had activated in the cage when he did. Not as a dream but as an Eva who could interact with and fight in the real world.

At least, that’s how it was supposed to be.

Six knelt on the desk she’d been standing on.

<<That idiot isn’t here? That’s weird.>>

<<He was just here a second ago,>> a voice said.

Six gasped. Asuka and Toji appeared, the former in a plugsuit and the latter in a g-suit.

“Toji! Asuka!”

Both of them looked fuzzy.

There were two other figures with them, both too vague to make out.

<<The little one’s Mari. I think the other one’s Hikari.>>

Asuka stood next to the window as Toji seated himself sideways. He folded his hands over his knees with a pained look.

“I thought you turned into a Torwächter!” Six said.

<<I did… Sorry about that. I tried fighting back, but I wasn’t strong enough. My ego’s about to go at any moment.>>

<<I can still fight,>> Asuka said. <<I’ll put you out of your misery.>>

<<Please and thank you.>>

Their physical selves were currently within the tunnel network, battling it out as enemies.

<<But…>> Noise ran through Asuka's figure. <<I don't know how much longer I have left.>>

Her consciousness would eventually be overwritten again if she remained synthesized with her Eva.

Six shook the smaller shadow. "Mari… Mari! Cat Ears, come on!"

<<It's no use. It's what she wants.>>

The small shade split into smaller, animal-shaped ones and ran to a distant desk before reforming into a humanoid shape.

<<We made the same attempt with Hikari earlier, but it's no use. And have you noticed, Six?>>

"What?"

<<Your clothes didn't change.>>

Before, they'd always switched to old uniforms whenever they entered school.

<<The being that halted time, Shinji's mom… She's probably gone now.>>

Toji winced as he balled up his left hand. His pale, human hand. <<Shinji was so traumatized, he forced me into a prosthetic. Dammit! If only Quatre had come through with the thing I asked.>>

<<Six, you have to go back! The Carrier is attacking headquarters.>>

What would be waiting for her when she did?

"Okay…" Little Rei Six nodded, not out of determination but out of a lack of options. Her blue hair bounced as she bounded out of the classroom.

But she tripped on something in the hallway and came back.

"By the way, I found this earlier." Six held out the thing that had jammed Eva-0.0 Type-F's plug hatch. "Is this what you asked Quatre for?"

It was a metal container, a working bio-preservation canister.

"Her name's written on the other side of it."

She turned the tube, showing them the “4” that was the Ayanami’s name.

Quatre did this? Toji decided that it must have been when Six was pulled in by the mutant Eva at Lake Ashi. Quatre could have forced a mental routine into Six’s mind via the mirror link.

He didn’t need to check inside to see what it was.

It was his cultivated leg.

< <Just what I’ve been waiting for!> >

Chapter 55:
The Giant of Light's Second Coming

THE BLACK ARMS that came down from the sky towed Yomotsu Hirasaka at breakneck speeds.

"Oh, come on! You can't be serious!"

All eyes were on Nerv Japan's Eva, the giant whose body was half made of light. He was fighting off a Gaghiel Angel Carrier. Aglow, Shinji grabbed the larval Angel's gigantic jaws.

Endo could only watch the strange sight through the eyes of the JSSDF Akashima.

"That Nerv Japan Eva isn't just glowing…it's getting bigger! It's almost like—"

Final Model continued expanding as he held onto Gaghiel's jaws. The Carrier shrieked in pain. Now, the only part of the Eva that wasn't glowing was the Time Brake on its back.

<<More than half!>>

That was the amount of life span he'd used. Final Model grew to Armaros proportions, swinging his shining battle axe.

The frozen time was released in the whirlwind, resuming the paused power of the Third Impact. Could Shinji control it?

CRACK!

The sound reverberated across the island. Final Model's four shoulder pylons had fractured from the inside, wings sprouting out of each of them.

<<Break!>>

《Break!》

Razor-sharp winds blew from the north of the island all the way to the south. Swinging his axe, the brilliant Final Model chopped Armaros' gigantic right arm off.

<<Another half!>>

The power he required was beyond words. The cost would drop his remaining life span to zero.

The giant of light stepped to the other side of the island. The ground wobbled. Shinji swung his axe through the air again. It sank into Armaros' left arm. Everything felt like it was moving in slow motion.

Shinji wondered if he had any regrets.

He was seventeen. Fresh soil. Infinite potential. On the other hand, one could never fulfill that potential. He'd suffered through anxiety and was terrified of death, but he was past the point of feeling regret.

Still, he was sick of his life.

He'd been chosen as a hero, and yet he could only squeal like a desperate animal.

His remaining leg pulled up to his knees and over the mountain to catch up with the rest of his body. The upper half of the giant of light spun, the battle axe chopping the black giant's left arm again.

<<What?!>>

The battle axe had found its mark, but it was buried in something that looked like a black serpent, wrapping the arm.

Shinji saw a ray of light in his peripheral vision. It came from the direction of Armaros' squirming right arm, tangled in the roots. He turned to face it…and something pierced his heart.

<<Gah… Longinus!>>

Shinji had cut off Armaros' right arm, effectively chopping down the roots of the World Tree. Freed from this labyrinth, the spear had immediately sought its prey. The Lance of Longinus had returned to our world.

PART 9

NEON GENESIS

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

EVANGELION: ANIMA

Chapter 56:
The Lance of Casuality

HE WAS ENGULFED by light. Shinji felt his consciousness drift away with the ever-expanding power of Final Impact.

<<What was I doing? I cut off Armaros' arm…and the Longinus came out of it…>>

And pierced him right through his shining chest.

His heart, the window to higher dimensions was already lost, but he felt intense agony all the same. The only thing left of the giant of light that Final Model had become was Shinji's ego.

But even that was passing away.

<<Armaros' remaining arm is still pulling the island…but…to where? I can't remember…>>

I told you. Nothing good can come of those wings. Kaworu whispered to Shinji, who was fading away with the giant of light.

Final Model's four wings remained extended. The wings that had first spread when Yomotsu Hirasaka was about to collide with the Earth. The wings that half the globe had seen during the Second Impact.

With the wings unleashed, we would lose the path to knowledge, and with it, our reason to exist.

<<Kaworu-kun!>> Shinji shouted. <<Where is this island going?! I know it's someplace important!>>

The light of the Longinus continued to pierce him with its immense length. Shinji tried to remember the island's destination within the intense pain.

It's headed to the town you call home.

The giant of light lurched, grabbing the spear that pierced him with a great rumble. Sparks flew from the gaps in his balled up hands, raining over half the island and causing the black monsters attacking the JSSDF and the North American Alliance to crumble into white salt.

Endo quickly issued an order to the ground troops. "Attention, all

units! I don't care who you belong to, do *not* leave the reactor fields! You will be saltified! Americans, step away from Wolfpack! Now!"

OOOOOOORGH!

The giant of light roared far overhead.

The Lance of Longinus was now a single strand of light, having exhausted its entire length in the roots of the World Tree. It maintained its speed of ninety kilometers per second while still in Shinji's hands, creating a deadly fireworks display.

OOOORGH!

The giant of light howled again, perhaps from pain or perhaps to brace himself. He continued gripping the spear, shining brighter as he approached his final moments—so bright that his outlines faded.

Oddly, everyone present understood what was happening.

<<The Third Impact was stopped with a bookmark. Now, the final page has been turned.>>

The single black point on the giant of light's back, the Time Brake, disappeared.

The four wings of light on his shoulders expanded like a mushroom cloud.

Soldiers and researchers alike were captivated by the sight.

"Amen," one said, submitting to the will of Heaven.

"No!" said another, in frustration.

The light suddenly froze.

"What?"

At first, no one could believe their eyes.

Everything else on the island moved at its usual pace. The skies were still covered with the roots that had become Armaros' arms. Her right arm was still cut off, and the left arm was still pulling the island and everything on it at breakneck speeds.

"That giant spear… It stopped!"

The island rumbled as it was towed. The strange field still cut through the winds. But now…

THRUM!

Final Model's heartbeat had joined the symphony.

The Lance of Longinus had stopped, still piercing the giant of light and still within his hands.

At that moment, the giant's wings also stopped expanding.

Had they continued, the whole world would have been engulfed by light, bringing an end to it all.

Chapter 57:
Clash of the Titans

"THE THIRD IMPACT stopped?!" Misato shouted, shocked at the footage the JSSDF had sent her.

Kaji scratched his chin and then pointed with his index finger. "Of course. The spear!"

The spear could sever the ties of causality. Indeed, it could even stop Lilith's perpetual birth. Now, it had stopped the impending catastrophe.

"How ironic that the spear that was to be Shinji's punishment would halt the curtain call."

"Only for the time being!" The voice came from the lower decks, reminding them that they'd only delayed the inevitable.

"Ritsuko—Dr. Akagi?!"

Ritsuko entered the middle deck, where Hyuga and Aoba were stationed, in a dirty lab coat. A sentry looked over to the command deck, unsure whether to let her through, but Misato gave him the go-ahead. He kept his eyes on Ritsuko while she stared Misato down over the gap between the middle and lower decks.

Maya interrupted the silence. "Look at the spear!"

The Longinus, within the giant's hands, slowly resumed its course. He no longer had the strength to stop its penetration. Shinji's very consciousness was fading.

The same thing had happened the last time he'd turned into a giant of light.

There was no way he could retain his humanity, given the vast amount of energy.

<<Mount Fuji!>> someone at the caldera observatory exclaimed.

The highest peak had just been blown away.

Armaros had jumped over the sea from the continent in the west,

and had tripped over the greatest mountain in the archipelago while her shoulders groped for purchase in the root-filled sky.

All fell silent as they saw the mighty mountain obliterated like it was a sandcastle. They felt the earthquake before they heard the sound. It came from the south, and the more sensitive technicians began to feel as if their bodies were floating.

"Yomotsu Hirasaka's approach has deeply disturbed the Earth's crust. We're gaining altitude! The entire Hakone caldera is going up!"

In just one more step, Armaros would probably arrive from the northwest. Though Shinji had amputated her right arm, her left continued to drag Yomotsu Hirasaka from the southeastern sea. The island ripped through the ocean floor, opening fissures of sulfur and lava. Meanwhile, the giant of light was still on his knees, pierced by the Lance of Longinus.

<<The island has passed the gap of the Izu Peninsula!>>

Doom approached Hakone from all sides.

Please, someone do something!

Final Model's hands fell limp to his sides as the lance resumed its motion. The wings of light fluttered.

"Calling all Evas!" Misato shouted. She hadn't thought of a brilliant strategy to get them out of this situation. This was a simple plea. "Calling all Evas. Our children. Please respond!"

She remembered her father and the part of her that had been burned away by the Second Impact.

Had she been alone, she would've been content to die within the light of the Third Impact. As it was, she wanted her family to be with her.

Shinji and Final Model had become the giant of light. The Asuka/Eva synthesis and Trois' Eva-0.0 were in the unreachable space of the World Tree's roots.

Their only remaining Eva, little Rei Six's Eva-0.0 Type-F, was locked in combat with Armisael. She was currently blocking its double helix, which flew about the command district. She was too busy to answer the call. Her stuttering telemetry showed that her heart was clanging like a bell.

Most of the city had been destroyed. They fired their remaining armaments into the air in waves to fend off the falling, half-formed creatures that came out of the roots. Unmanned N_2 Flankers took advantage of the situation and shot out of the caldera with their maser guns blazing.

The situation was hopeless, as far as anyone could tell. The end of civilization had arrived, and it would begin at Hakone.

Misato's arm went limp as she held the receiver. Kaji, now released from Seele, supported her before she could fall.

<<Yes.>>

<<What? I'm busy.>>

The distorted signals came from Eva-0.0 and Eva-02.

"Trois?! Asuka?!"

Misato looked southeast.

The Magi flashed with an earthquake warning.

The outer rim of the southeastern mountains exploded, forming a sort of curtain. The upper crust of the Hakone caldera rippled, and the white, foaming waters of Laki Ashi rushed into the city.

The island-pulling arm was now above Tokyo-3. Two Evas flew out of the stump where the giant's other arm had been—Trois' Eva-0.0, and the Asuka/Eva synthesis, Crimson A1.

Each wielded one of the Field Penetrators, Kesara and Basara.

They knew exactly where to strike.

"I'll take right. You take left."

<<Don't boss me around.>>

Waves rocked the Hakone caldera, knocking down structures that had been built to withstand an earthquake. The *Yamato*, which had landed on the western shore of Yomotsu Hirasaka Island, was now sliding into Lake Ashi.

The orange Eva-0.0—equipped with a propulsion unit, but possessing no airborne mobility—flew in a parabola that was practically a straight line. Crimson A1 spiraled around it with great agility.

They were both headed for the giant of light.

“Ikari-kun!”

<<Stupid Shinji!>>

The two Evas looked like dolls next to the giant of light. Still, Trois and Asuka brought their swords down with a bright flash.

Back on the surface, Eva-0.0 Type-F slammed into the hardened double helix of the Armisael Carrier with the Field Piercer. In the southeastern sky, Six saw Eva-0.0 and Eva-02 slice through the giant of light’s four wings. She turned away from the intense glare.

At the same moment, the Longinus finished running through the giant’s chest and disappeared into the Pacific.

The giant of light wavered.

Perhaps that title was no longer appropriate for him. He was quickly losing light.

But then, kicked out of his crouching position, the fading Eva leaped over Hakone. He was headed toward Armaros.

He wouldn’t be satisfied unless he tried.

Shinji, now a gray giant, struck Armaros’ face, which had already been blasted by Trois’ shot, with his fist. The impact produced something that looked like four suns overhead. They burned brightly, illuminating the two monstrosities.

Four new wings cut through Shinji’s shoulders and spread throughout the sky. When they touched the roots, a torrent of pure white light poured forth.

BRRRRR!

The shrunken Earth shook as shock waves rippled across the planet. The four wings were like flaming torches burning in the blackness of space. Auroras appeared all over the globe. Shadows larger than the clouds crept over the ground in slow motion.

The land around Hakone continued to rise, the quakes having arrived in old Gotemba now. The gigantic figure compressing the atmosphere slowly collapsed, spawning clouds as it fell. The four torches swayed in the sky, burning as far as the moon’s former orbit.

As the light of the Third Impact faded, the gray giant began scattering like ash. Rei Trois and Asuka had thought that cutting Shinji off from the impact’s power would save him. But they were wrong.

<< Asuka…Ayanami…I— >>

Had his consciousness survived, despite the loss of power?

"Ikari-kun! Ikari-kun…! Ikari-kun!" Rei Trois continued calling out his name.

Shinji didn't know what to do or say at this point.

And so he crumbled into the atmosphere and was blown away.

<< That was way too quick, Shinji. >>

Toji clicked his tongue, his image riddled with noise. He'd watched everything through the window of the oddly quiet classroom.

<< Here we go, Soryu! >>

Asuka stood still next to him. << What the hell…did that idiot… think he was doing? >>

This was the conscious half of her. The other half was piloting Crimson A1.

<< Not the time to mope, Soryu! >>

<< How can I not?! >>

THUD!

Toji rolled his prosthetic leg in her direction. << Get a hold of yourself! Where do you think we are? Our physical bodies are outside, but our egos are in here. In Shinji's dream! >>

Asuka gasped in understanding.

<< That's right, >> Toji continued. << We're not done yet! >>

She watched as Toji took a pale left leg out of the LCL canister. It was little more than an amputated femur, which he attached to his own stump. The limb connected itself to him without stitch or suture, and the pale leg pulsed with the hyphae of an Angel.

The Angel Bardiel.

<< Argh! >>

The prosthetic anchor was forced out of him from the inside, along with any muscular tissue attached to it. The prosthetic joint fell with a bloody thud.

The limb itself wasn't possessed by an Angel. Toji and Eva-03 had

been infected three years ago, and Bardiel would reawaken upon sensing his full humanity. He'd given up on organic limbs and lived with cybernetics for that very reason.

Toji's face wrenched with pain, but he smiled all the same. <<Shinji's body…might just be a vessel… Even if he died…to him it might be like getting lost…>>

<<What… What are we supposed to do then?>> Asuka asked.

<<I dunno. Something. Anything. As for me…I've got a score to settle…>>

Toji stood. He looked over at the slouching shade at the other desk, the shade they'd supposed to be Hikari. He returned his gaze to Asuka and slapped her shoulder with his fading hand.

<<Urgh… See you…on the outside!>>

Toji disappeared from the classroom of Shinji's dream.

Do something, he said. Well, what?!

Why was she getting so depressed over something Shinji had done?

She felt like she was being taken for a ride. It was time to ask the driver.

She opened the classroom window.

<<Don't you dare get off here! I'm going to kill you if you do!>>

Beneath her, people gathering on the school grounds in droves, even though the dream was supposed to be impenetrable.

THROB!

Was that an answer? Where is it coming from?

<<Where are you, Shinji?!>>

The people looked up at Asuka. As she scanned the crowd, she realized they were looking at something above her.

<<The World Tree!>>

There was a gaping hole in the root-covered sky. The roots of the World Tree were supposed to be impervious to physical phenomena.

And yet, Shinji's Third Impact had burned right through them.

The roots were flaking and falling but disappeared before they could reach the Earth.

Chapter 58:
Longinus Ring

"Look! There's a hole in the roots!"

A clear voice rang out, confirming the phenomenon.

In the command center, the main display switched to footage from the aerial surveillance cameras. It didn't take long for everyone to spot the gap in the root-filled sky.

"The wings—the fire of Final Impact—burned right through them." Fuyutsuki said.

Soon, they began receiving reports that people were once again being turned into pillars of salt.

"That seems about par for the course, considering we're living out a legend."

"Don't let the press hear that."

Misato gave Fuyutsuki a tired smile. The electromagnetic pulse generated by the Impact was causing tremendous damage throughout the city.

"Cut the power to commercial and residential areas," Misato ordered.

<<Shelter 5 of Tokyo-3 has flooded! Signs of life…zero.>>

Shelter 5 contained the most evacuees.

"What?!"

Things were probably even worse outside of Hakone.

The Third Impact, the debt that humanity owed, had been halted when it was unexpectedly quartered and shot into the sky. They'd avoided paying the full price until now. This number of casualties was expected.

And yet—

<<Those people are safe now. I moved all of them to the school.>> Six's communication window flashed to interrupt their

conversation.

“Hakone command to Six. Say again?” Hyuga said, unsure what she was talking about.

<<I said I moved the people in the southern shelter out! It’s empty now!>>

“Six, you… You did what?!”

<<The school is in one piece. Not a bit of it is broken. Shinji’s still dreaming!>>

Despite young Six’s lack of vocabulary, her words gave everyone in the command center hope. The Eva’s dream was a place layered upon reality. Nothing could enter it if the dreamer didn’t will it. The children had taken advantage of this reality and evacuated everyone there. But most of all—

“Shinji-kun…”

Six had revealed the existence of Shinji’s will. He was alive enough to affect reality.

“Announcement from the ESO observatory in La Paz!” Aoba shouted. “The Longinus has returned to its original altitude of twenty thousand kilometers and is observed to be 157,000 kilometers long!”

“It kept growing inside the roots!”

“Its shape is now elliptical and will soon reach full circle!”

The ray of light that was the Lance of Longinus spread across the sky like a white thread.

<<Hakone command! It’s Armaros!>>

Having trampled the western ridge of the caldera, the black giant jumped to Yomotsu Hirasaka Island, which was riding up the southwest side. The wing of a large aircraft was caught in the black giant’s leap and torn to pieces.

“Who was that?! What kind of idiot do you have to be to fly under these conditions?!”

“We can’t afford to send out rescue right now.”

<<I’ll take care of it. I think it’s the doctors of the U.S. Eva. They’re still looking for Mari.>>

The graviton floaters of Rei Six's Eva-0.0 Type-F whirred awake, and she flew toward the plane, heavily damaged and tilting.

"We're not done here, Six! We'll talk about you evacuating the civilians later!" Misato caught herself. "Later"? She still thought there was a *later* for them, despite everything that was going on.

A loud shock wave brought her back to her senses.

<<Get back here, stupid Shinji!>> This came from Shinji's entry plug. The voice belonged to Asuka. <<Shinji!>>

Shinji's figure was a shade conjured up by the dream, and it was currently inside an entry plug, transported all the way to the classroom. Six had left the hatch open after confirming that Shinji *wasn't* inside. Now, Asuka was banging on the outside of the plug with a broom, and her voice was being picked up by its internal microphone.

"Wait, I thought Asuka is synthesized right now."

"I guess her ego made it to the classroom."

Kaji nodded. "So the kids have made a little command center for themselves there."

"They what?!"

Misato was irked, despite knowing she had the school to thank for the safety of the civilians.

"Oh, don't be mad," Kaji said. "I'm sure they weren't being insubordinate just for the sake of it."

"The Longinus…" The orbiting trail of light was about to meet its own tail. A clear, bell-like ringing echoed across the entire planet. The Earth shook again. There were no more gaps in the root covered sky.

"It's a ring…a perfect circle."

A rumbling came from the depths of the Earth, and seismic stations around the world observed earthquakes that shared the same waveform. They sounded like countless bells being struck in rapid succession.

Everyone heard it, but no one wanted to say what it was.

"Anomaly over the Pacific Ocean!"

Yomotsu Hirasaka was being dragged across the ocean floor, shaking and crushing the planet as it went. The wounds of the sea let

loose flames, culminating in the eruption of the cracked Mount Fuji.

Yet, oddly enough, the eruptions never came back down. They were all sucked up by the giant moon, which was now only forty thousand kilometers overhead. The moon was eating the Earth's entrails.

"It's taking up more material—and at a faster rate—than when the spatial lens was still around. We don't have much time!" Maya was close to shrieking in the sub-booth.

"This is…the end.!" Misato muttered. Her fists were clenched so hard that her knuckles turned white.

Meanwhile, Ritsuko was looking at the data in the booth next to Maya. "Oh, you called in Mizusato-sensei as well, I see."

Engrossed in his calculations, Aoba's lecturer didn't bother to look up. "It's been a long time. Ever wondered how your pretty friend over there managed to make blades that cut right through the giant of light's wings?"

Ritsuko peeked at the display. "Such power… And the ring's field strength is continuously fluctuating, like something is squeezing it. No wonder it sounds like bells."

<<This is the JSSDF Akashima—Kzzt—Nerv Japan…T minus sixty… Utilizing Iphiclus-grade N_2 warheads.>>

Following this noise-riddled transmission, a flash as bright as a falling star descended upon Yomotsu Hirasaka. The North American Alliance and the South American Coalition had used their precious N_2 charges to try and destroy the Ark.

"I thought we made it clear in the reports that the Ark is impervious to physical damage!"

"They just have to see for themselves."

By the time the noise from the N_2 charges faded, the rocky mountains surrounding the Ark had been leveled. UAVs sent to assess the effects of the explosion captured an image of the cube standing unharmed in the newly made crater.

We might be freed from the Human Instrumentality Project if that thing were destroyed. But as far as we know from the data, Armaros is the only one who can actually interact with it.

Misato didn't know what to do.

Meanwhile, Asuka's ego continued calling out to Shinji.

That was when Misato saw it. Every time Asuka banged on the empty plug, Final Model's supposedly non-reactive status board reacted. Shinji's vitals were all still at zero. But there was a faint pulse every time she struck the plug.

Kaji noticed it, too. "Are you calling Shinji, Asuka?"

<<Ryoji? Or are you Seele?>> Asuka stopped when she heard the voice over the transmission.

"Seele was recently fired. Anyway, don't you think it's better for Shinji this way?"

<<Huh?>>

"He's finally been relieved of all his baggage. Do you really want to call him back to face an apocalypse?"

"All hands!" Misato suddenly shouted. "All hands! Start clapping!"

The crew of the command center was understandably confused at this strange order from their commander. Fuyutsuki was the only one who actually clapped.

<<That idiot wasn't relieved of anything. He left his baggage for us to take care of! He'll pay for that!>>

"Every time you hit that plug, Shinji's vital readings pick up his pulse."

The crew gasped, listening in on the conversation now. They joined Fuyutsuki in his clapping.

<<Seriously?!>>

"Can't tell you why, though. For all we know, Shinji probably thinks he's dead. I mean, he really *is* dead. But we might as well take full advantage of the fact that we're living out a legend."

<<What should I do?>>

"It's time for the romantic portion of our story. First, think of the one you love. You must give him a vessel."

<<What the hell are you talking about?>> Asuka demanded.

She'd brought the broom to a halt, and yet the sound went on. Was it coming from the grounds?

The mass of worried civilians was looking at the sky. Prompted by Asuka's rhythm, they'd begun clapping and making noise with anything they could find.

Tokyo-3, their home, had been destroyed. The strange school was peaceful, but everything outside of the invisible wall was in shambles. Gravity had lost its hold, and some objects were being sucked into the sky.

The people couldn't help themselves. They would've started screaming if it weren't for Asuka's racket. They heard a rhythm, and their bodies followed.

The internal pressure increased until—

THRUM!

Asuka heard another heartbeat inside of her.

She disappeared from the classroom. She'd been synthesized with the Eva and life-form data for too long, and her ego melted away.

Armaros was barraged by artillery.

The waterline of Lake Ashi had almost reached the *Yamato*'s deck. Its main guns roared as it fired into the black giant, now standing on the edge of the plateau-like island.

Armaros whispered with Hikari's voice again. << Help me, Toji… Kodama. >>

And that's when it happened.

"Torwächters coming out of the severed roots!"

The two giants came toward the *Yamato*, but their movements weren't in sync. One of them turned to pursue Armaros.

<< Hakone command! Do not shoot! You'll hit Suzuhara! >> Rei Trois said.

One of the Torwächters was on Armaros' back, plunging his blade arm into the cracks of her armor.

"Suzuhara is in control of the Torwächter? But how?!"

"Torwächter Pattern Blue!" Hyuga shouted.

"Those hyphae! They're infecting Armaros!"

“Bardiel! It’s awake?!” Misato gasped. “What happened to Suzuhara’s leg sample?!”

“Specimen storage was affected when Rei Quatre’s mutant Eva raided the base.”

Kaji laughed through clenched teeth. Misato could no longer think this was mere coincidence.

“You brats really did a number on us!”

Armaros turned to the Torwächter and smashed his chest in with her left hand, revealing the crushed nose of the Platypus-2 jet within. The canopy went flying, dragging hyphal filaments with it.

“Stay down, you little brat!” Toji shouted.

The canopy went flying, dragging hyphal filaments with it.

"Stay down, you little brat!" Toji shouted.

■

CRACK!

Bardiel's mycelial growth had gained enough mass that it cracked Armaros' armor from the inside. The white Eva-02, Heurtebise, slid out of the gash in the supergiant's spine. But Bardiel couldn't be allowed to have free reign. Soon, its hyphae would take over Heurtebise *and* Hikari.

But as the plug released, the mycelial infection stopped. The hatch opened.

"Ack! Gah! You're late, Toji!"

Toji was too preoccupied to be shocked. "I got lost in the roots! Wouldn't have made it out if she didn't call me! Uh…what's with the dirty rags, Kensuke?"

Kensuke held Hikari in his arms, and they were both wrapped in aged cloth.

"Excuse you! These dirty rags happen to be the Shroud of Turin. We've been hiding under it this whole time."

Armaros flailed, struggling to free herself from the Torwächter. Toji's left arm, tied with a tight harness at the joint, would do its final duty. It would be cut off right after the Angel was put to sleep. But for now, it threw a small ampoule.

"Look, Hikari! Your real sister isn't a monster!"

Hikari's blank eyes followed the ampoule. It contained the remains of the saltified Kodama, Hikari's sister.

"Kodama…Toji!"

Her dazed eyes filled with tears as her emotions came flooding back.

Meanwhile, the other Torwächter, the substitute Kodama, had begun acting strangely. It was hit with a volley of artillery fire, courtesy of the battleship *Yamato*, and promptly crumbled.

Toji had accomplished half of his mission.

"What now?!"

But he couldn't control Bardiel's power for long. He felt the Angel's strong resistance. It was probably going to take over and turn him into the next Armaros.

But there was one limb it couldn't possess—the giant's left arm.

It's not the left arm…it's the thing coiled around it like a snake.

"That's the Devil's Backbone!"

The weapon that could fire an A.T. Field-eroding graviton shot had originally been an Eva—an experiment driven mad by a Q.R. Signum. The serpentine coil moved the left hand around Armaros' back and peeled Toji's Torwächter off of it.

"The Devil's Backbone is taking over Armaros' body?!"

The Suzuhara Torwächter was still holding on to Heurtebise's plug unit with Kensuke and Hikari inside it. *Please make a protective field like an Eva!*

Having lost its host, Heurtebise slipped out of Armaros' back and fell to the ground. As the Suzuhara Torwächter tumbled through the air, Eva-0.0 and the Asuka/Eva synthesis approached.

"Suzuhara-kun!" Trois' voice came out of Eva-0.0.

"Can't hold on… You gotta hurry!"

The Asuka/Eva synthesis went after Armaros, now freed from Toji.

"What's Soryu planning?"

<<She's…lost herself. She's alive but won't respond.>>

Lost to the synthesis.

The Platypus-2's crushed cockpit peeked out of Suzuhara's damaged chest. Eva-0.0 slowly lowered her prog knife. It let out an ear piercing whine. Toji painfully stretched out his left arm as Bardiel's hyphae continued to spread. He squeezed the edge of the cockpit so Trois could see it.

"Dammit! I can't be Armaros now…not after we finally made a dent in the Ark!"

<<We did?>>

Someone responded to Toji's private musings.

"That voice… Mari? Are you in the U.S. Eva?"

"Toji!"

Kensuke crawled out from the Torwächter's hand with Hikari in

his arms, but Trois stopped them from approaching Eva-0.0.

<<Not yet, Aida-san. Don't let Horaki near.>>

She'd cut off Toji's arm if he did.

"Just hang in there, Hikari… It'll all be over soon…"

"To…ji…"

Armaros continued toward the Ark, but its body had begun shrinking. It was returning to its normal size, which meant it would still be twice the size of an Eva.

Chapter 59:
Shape of Shinji

<< LET ME TELL YOU a fairy tale of the lilin. Lilith was profligate. Eve swallowed the serpent's lies whole. Now, why did Adam do nothing to prevent these things? >>

What are you talking about, Kaworu-kun?

<< Like I said, it's a fairy tale. A tale in which the truth is concealed. You see, Adam was cut down. >>

What?

<< The snake—that is, sin and evil—was part of Adam from the beginning. To become as a god, Adam had to abandon his most human aspects. >>

What for?

<< To see the being who granted him Lilith. And for this reason, he was cut off. >>

See? See who?

<< The fullness…of light. >>

The Asuka/Eva synthesis was suddenly damaged as it circled

over to Armaros' front. Had the Devil's Backbone clipped her? That certainly appeared to be the case.

A vertical rupture had appeared in her lower body—a dimensional one—and it appeared on the synthesis's belly. The rupture began to grow, and the heartbeat grew louder with it.

The Devil's Backbone turned its maw toward Crimson A1 and tried to consume it, but an arm extended out of the rupture, grabbing the serpent's head.

The Asuka/Eva synthesis arched her body, lifting her arms. The thing from the other side of the rupture came into the world, its hands clutching the shocked head of Armaros.

The serpent wriggled free, and Armaros—or whatever it was now—backed away, not quite knowing what to do with the thing in front of it.

“What’s going on?” Misato asked.

Was this Final Model with his wings cut off? It was similar but not quite the same. Indeed, a brand-new Eva had been born into this broken world.

A brand-new Eva had been born into this broken world.

■

“The Virgin Birth. The Immaculate Conception.” Fuyutsuki muttered.

“I see,” Kaji said, making the connection. “Asuka, when you were overwhelmed with the Earth’s life-form data on the moon’s Ark…”

Misato saw what he was getting at. “Shinji’s life-form data was in there, too.”

“Ow, that hurt!”

Asuka screamed in her plug, having regained her human body. Had the pain of birth returned her sense of self? The Asuka/Eva synthesis had expended all her energy closing the birth tunnel, and the bond between human and Eva had been dissolved. She was back in Eva-02.

The first thing she saw was the inside of her own plug. The first thing she heard was loud howling. The first thing she felt was Azuchi the dog’s tongue on her face.

“I can’t—”

Her face flushed when she realized what had just happened. She covered her still-throbbing lower body with her hands.

“I can’t believe you came out of… You idiot! Moron! Dumbass!”

Eva-02 began kicking the pristine Eva.

<<Ow! Asuka?!>> The voice definitely belonged to Shinji. <<What’s happening out there?!>>

Shinji had been reborn with a new body, along with Final Model.

“Data is getting updated for the new unit!”

“The reversal of the window to higher dimensions. Deleting all inconsistencies, making the window bidirectional.”

Final Model’s information came flooding into the command center. Maya and Ritsuko saw it update in real time. It was a completely different creature, but unlike its predecessors, it was inherently harmonious instead of dangerous.

“Yes, and this heart… It’s taking in so much energy that it’s creating a surplus. Is it breathing?”

“Maybe the lives of Eva-01 Final Model and his pilot were spent

when his wings were cut off."

The fingers of Aoba's lecturer hadn't stopped moving since he'd started looking at the data. With a strict ban on all mobile devices, the theoretical physicist had no other way to make his calculations.

"He really died. That heart should've been obliterated. And yet the waveform of the transdimensional window remained. Those waveforms may have gained their own unique signature, and when they reset…"

"Ah."

Someone gasped as Shinji's Eva burned a red trail through the sky.

<<Ikari-kun!>>

Having left Toji and the others in the hands of the JSSDF, Trois' Eva-0.0 flung Shinji's weapon to him. Everything was accelerated, and both her voice and the weapon seemed slow.

"Thanks, Trois!"

He turned to grab it and then unsheathed the Magorox Stage 2.

<<Suzuhara…got Hikari out… Do you know what to do now… my baby?>> Asuka asked.

"I know. It'd be worse if you guys took care of this problem!"

The one who killed Armaros would become the next Armaros.

<<So it's okay if you go and sacrifice yourself…? Is that it?>>

"Well, someone has to do something. Nothing will get done if we just sit here arguing about it. But now the Devil's Backbone might turn into Armaros. I don't know what's going on anymore."

<<That's rich, coming from you.>>

Armaros summoned four new Angel Carriers, but Trois' gamma-ray laser cannon and Asuka's Zeruel ribbons each brought one down. Shinji took a deep breath, and by the time he exhaled, the remaining two had been imploded by the glimmering blade of the Magorox.

"You lined the entire blade with micro black holes?" Maya sighed with an exasperated smile.

Carrier and cocoon were separated, and both were immediately sucked up to the moon, still hungry for matter.

Shinji's Eva collided with Armaros. He felt a sense of déjà vu as he fought the writhing serpent head. He remembered his days as a Torwächter and that he'd fought a snake back then.

A vision flashed before him, and he flinched. It looked as if his own twisted face was within the mouth of the Devil's Backbone.

Am I the snake, Kaworu-kun? Am I the deformity cast away from Adam?

<<That is not a thing for the you right now to know.>> A straightforward answer, devoid of mystery for once. <<And now, you wish to escape the wheel, do you not? Well, allow me to give you the right to do so.>>

You're really not stopping me?

<<I told you, Shinji-kun. I am always on your side. No matter what you may become.>>

Kaworu-kun?

<<Goodbye.>> He sounded like he was smiling.

Shinji's blade flashed, and it cut across Armaros' gigantic body from its left arm down. The Q.R. Signums shattered into red shards. The black giant that had become part of the World Tree in the sky fell to the Earth like a spider whose thread had been cut. It crushed the edge of Yomotsu Hirasaka, hanging over the Hakone caldera, and fell onto the eastern shore of Lake Ashi.

Shinji couldn't finish it off. And yet, he had to stop it, chain it. But how? Bakelite? That was impossible. Nothing in this world could restrain Armaros for long.

He heard Maya's voice as he drifted in the extended flow of time. <<Absolute zero… Sink it to the bottom… Lake Ashi…>>

What had Kaworu said about escaping the wheel? But as Shinji hesitated, a giant beast used him as a stepping stone and leaped over him.

"Mari?!"

Wolfpack was missing its front paws and had probably used up what little power it had left in that jump. It clamped its jaw onto the Devil's Backbone's field, shattering the restraint armor on its head.

<<Mari, stop!>>

<< Asuka, Shinji…watch me! This is my last chance to make my dream come true! >>

Wolfpack fired a series of shots from its particle cannon into the Devil's Backbone. Armaros' armor was filled with a pale blue light. It exploded from the inside. Wolfpack had consumed the serpentine creature.

"What have you done?"

<< I have no interest in anything outside of the pack, and I think that's for the benefit of everyone I've come into contact with…urp. Oh, I feel so satisfied now, I don't know what to do! >>

The battle was over. And to the victor went the spoils.

The change occurred immediately. Wolfpack's transformation into Armaros took place faster than it had with Heurtebise, possibly because Mari was a willing participant.

But the ceremony wasn't without its anomalies. For although Wolfpack was an Eva, it wasn't human. The black giant rejected its new host, writhing on the surface of the beast's body. But even Armaros was powerless to resist the law: The one who killed Armaros would become the next Armaros.

The giant had fled into the Devil's Backbone, making the serpent its new core. Each time it appeared on the surface of Wolfpack's body, Mari's field beasts immediately appeared to bite it, forcing it back into its body.

Perhaps that was how Mari retained her personality, despite becoming Armaros.

<< The Ark is moving from the island to Lake Ashi! >>

<< Saltification area moving west! Take caution! >>

During the storm, when things were being sucked into the heavens, unencrypted alerts were issued over the general frequency. The transmissions came from the multitude of armies on Yomotsu Hirasaka.

The Human Instrumentality Project's structure, The Ark, was on the move.

Mari had called it to her. The Ark quietly followed the new

Armaros as Wolfpack walked down a slope.

And so, the new minister for the Human Instrumentality Project was decided.

The vertical roots stiffened and took them into the sky.

“Where are you going?”

<<A quiet place where I can rest. The farther the better.>>

There was a place only accessible through the tunnel network. Shinji and the rest knew where the roots of the World Tree would take her.

“Mari, that’s—”

<<Bye-bye, and don’t wake me up.>>

And so, the black beast disappeared. Shinji tried pursuing her, but the tunnel network began crumbling. Perhaps she’d ordered it to leave no trace, or perhaps the effects of Shinji’s spear were finally running out.

Either way, the roots faded from the sky.

<<The Lance of Longinus is moving!>> Asuka shouted.

A golden retriever jumped out of the crashed aircraft and bounded over to Rei Six. Azuchi’s long-lost sister had finally returned.

“Momo!”

“Woof!”

Wolfpack and the Ark had arrived at the last stop of the tunnel network—the Apple’s Core. It was located on the other side of the sun, and it had been the testing ground of the first Human Instrumentality Project. Shinji’s Lance of Lucretius had landed here, and Wolfpack pulled it out of the ground with its mouth. This was the limit of Shinji’s consciousness. The spear that stood at the end of the world.

Wolfpack threw it into the heavens. It was *his* spear. It would eventually find its way back to Earth—no, to that forgotten planet. In the world of eternal night, Wolfpack curled its giant body around the Ark and went to sleep.

The Earth and moon each had their respective Arks. Now, Mari

had taken one of them to the Apple's Core, also known as Eden. With this loss, the planet Shinji was on had lost the right to be called Earth or moon.

The Lance of Longinus was exiting orbit. It took the broken fragments of the moon along with it, appearing like a whirlwind that would travel through space. The planet that had been its long-time companion began to move as if being pulled by the lance.

The next iteration of the Human Instrumentality Project would be between the new Earth, which was the moon, and the Apple's Core, which was Eden. The two planets had quite a bit of distance to close before their next dance.

As for the survivors of the shrunken planet formerly known as Earth, well, they were stranded there.

"Good enough for me," Misato remarked.

At least Shinji and the others—this iteration of them, anyway—had managed to escape the wheel of the Human Instrumentality Project.

And so the apocalypse came to an unsatisfying end. The world would eventually rebuild itself, even without closure.

The next day, the moon disappeared behind the sun, siphoning materials off of Jupiter, which happened to be in range.

"It's probably quiet over on the Apple's Core," Asuka said. "Doubt it'll get destroyed with Mari on it."

As for Shinji and his friends, they'd have to procure a new moon soon to stabilize the planet's orbit.

"Where do we start?" Rei Trois asked.

"With my father."

And then…

They had their work cut out for them.

THE END

OMAKE

NEON GENESIS

CONCEPT GALLERY

EVANGELION: ANIMA

I couldn't decide on Final Model's head.
Nope.
Nope.
← How does this stay on?
NAMELESS BABY
We wanted a new Eva at the very end.
SUSPECTED OF BEING A SPIRAL FINAL MODEL
The first time this unit was drawn was in the novel, so it doesn't have rough sketches or concept art. ▶
I had one more pattern after we finished the serialization, but it's somewhere in my scribbles folder.
The unit remains tabled even after the war and takes the place of an observer rather than being restrained. Participates in the post-war reconstruction effort Project Moon Thief.
AMOUNT OF TYPOS INNUMERABLE
Wait!
Wasn't your right arm chopped off along with the laser cannon?
CONTINUITY ERRORS
Armaros' back plates are supposed to be connected to the Torwächters, so for Hikarimaros to have these plates at the time would be...
...yeah.
OR?

Onward
to their
new genesis.

Postscript

In visual art, there is a way of checking the overall balance of a work by drawing something and then taking a step back to look at the whole thing. As far as writing is concerned, you can't really read anything when you take a step back, making it a difficult medium to strike a good balance in. It's been five years since the serialization, and I still don't feel like my writing's improved. But at least I've managed to put down everything I wanted to say about *ANIMA*.

And I have many people to thank for giving me that amount of time: serialization editor-in-chief Abiru; Kageyama, my editor during the early phases of serialization; Utatane, cover illustrator of the serialization run; Kio, guest mecha designer; and Kashiwabara, who worked so hard that he got sick and had to return to his hometown. For this volume, I would like to thank: guest illustrator Magaki; editor-in-chief Koarai; my editor, Ishiguro; designer Kameguchi; and many others. I thank you all for your extraordinary efforts.

And to all the readers who have been waiting so long for the final volume after the end of the serialization…it has been a long wait indeed.

Thank you all for reading this.

—IKUTO YAMASHITA,
EVANGELION MECHA DESIGNER

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